

THREE BRASSO BAILS

BY
GEORGE R. SIMS

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THE DAGONET BALLADS.

PRICE SIXPENCE.

NOW READY,

THE SOCIAL KALEIDOSCOPE,

FIRST AND SECOND SERIES.

PRICE SIXPENCE EACH.

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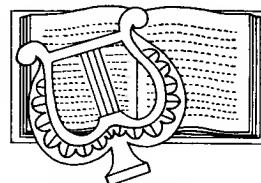
JOHN P. FULLER, WINE OFFICE-COURT, E.C.

SHORTLY WILL APPEAR
IN
ONE AND ALL
A NEW SERIAL STORY,
ENTITLED
"ROGUES AND VAGABONDS."
BY GEORGE R. SIMS.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

20, WINE OFFICE COURT, FLEET STREET, E.C.

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In Memoriam

Ruth Candler Lovett

1935-1964



THREE BRASS BALLS.

BY

GEORGE R. SIMS,

AUTHOR OF

“THE SOCIAL KALEIDOSCOPE,” “ZEPH,” “THE DAGONET BALLADS,” &c.

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DEDICATION.



These Pages are affectionately dedicated to

MY UNCLE.

PREFACE.

THE “Three Brass Balls” which occasionally figure at the side of a Pawnbroker’s door have been selected as a title for these sketches, the “Three Gilt Balls,” which hang higher up, having already done duty outside a cover. The writer’s purpose has not been to attack the trade, which is, with few exceptions, honourably conducted, but to narrate the history of some of the customers. He takes this opportunity of acknowledging the kindness of an old-established and highly-esteemed pawnbroker, who placed much valuable information at his service.

London, June, 1880.

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THREE BRASS BALLS.

PROLOGUE.

THREE BRASS BALLS ! They are in half relief on the big outside door-plate of the pawnbroker's shop. Three Brass Balls ! Their gilded brethren hang high above them—so high that only those who look up to the heavens can see them. They gleam in the bright summer sunshine ; they loom dimly through the winter fog, those "golden" balls, far up above the heads of the toiling multitude that surges from morn till night along the busy thoroughfare. Over the gates of Hades was the dread inscription, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." Over the pawnbroker's shop door the pendant sign says mutely to eye and heart, "Abandon something all ye who enter here." Abandon something ! A prized trinket of happier days, a souvenir of the long ago, a keepsake, given, perhaps, by one who lies cold in the grave, the old familiar objects of home, the heirlooms kept sacredly for generations, the furniture of your house, the clothes from you back, the implements of your daily toil, the bed you lie on—it matters not what,—here all is fish that comes to the mighty net.

Here, on the door-plate opposite your eyes, are the three

brass balls bidding the harassed, the poor, the starving, and the reckless enter and abandon something in exchange for silver and gold—in exchange, perhaps, for the warmth that the numbed limbs need, for the food that the gnawing hunger craves.

The golden symbols are too high above for all the storm-tossed wanderers who drift to this haven of grace to see. They come with trembling feet and blushing cheeks, maybe; with eyes cast down to earth, not raised to the heavens above. They might not see the brave emblems that hang on high in all the glory of gold leaf and burnish. But their furtive glances are met by the three brass balls on the bold broad plate at the door, and they creep into the narrow dark boxes, where all is gloom, and where unseen they make the sacrifice.

When the tempest howls, and the billows, rising like huge mountains, threaten to engulf the ship, her load is lightened. Over into the seething ocean the priceless cargo is flung bit by bit that she may ride through the gale. Fierce are the storms too often that rage around the human craft on the ocean of life. With trembling hands and tearful eyes little by little the cargo is parted with, that the vessel may keep upon its way and not be shattered by the threatening waves of want and misery. And when at last the frail human craft drifts into its last harbour it is too often but a bare battered hulk.

Here it is that the cargo is lightened; here it is, under the shadow of the three brass balls, that one by one the

prized objects of life are flung overboard, too often to drift away and be seen no more by those to whom they are most dear.

To the reckless and the unthrifty this is but a depot—a place to be visited from time to time with a light heart when the week's money has gone in drink, or a day's outing calls for more cash in hand. The regular customers crowd at certain periods and sacrifice their household gods with no thought of sacrilege, intending to redeem them and sacrifice them again, and looking upon the proceeding as an ordinary transaction of everyday life.

But there are those who creep here with breaking hearts and swimming eyes to offer up all that is dearest to them—to sacrifice, often with the holiest motive, their most cherished idols. With them too often the sacrifice is complete. There is no redemption. The idol is cast down for ever; the storm will carry away far, far beyond their longing eyes the treasures that in their despair they trusted to the ocean.

The Fates are three, the Furies are three, and the ancient symbols over the pawnbroker's door are three.

Three Brass Balls! Weird and woful are the stories they could tell of the ruined and broken-hearted, of the wanton and the reckless, the wicked and the cruel, that creep past them day by day into the gloom beyond. It is the voice they lack which now shall speak; they are the stories hidden away in their brazen breasts which here shall be told. Poverty and crime, starvation and waste, virtue

and vice, all the sorrows and all the sins have filed past those three brass balls to swell the catalogue of objects which lie garnered within. Cold and cruel in the sharp winter air the brazen emblems gleam like mocking demons at the gates of Purgatory ; and these are the secrets which they hide in their hollow hearts.

PLEDGE I.

A GOLD BRACELET.

THERE it lies among the unredeemed pledges, a beautiful gold bracelet. Hardly a tale of poverty or wretchedness about that, one would think. The poor don't have massive gold bracelets to pawn; flatirons and flannel petticoats are more in their way.

How did this bracelet come to be pawned and remain unredeemed? Let us look at the ticket on it. "Mrs. Smith"—ah, a married lady. Amount advanced, £2. Why, the bracelet is honestly worth £5. How ever came Mrs. Smith to part with her beautiful bracelet for such an absurd sum?

Was she poor, this Mrs. Smith? Had she come down in the world suddenly and been compelled to part with her jewellery to pay rent, or to buy her sick husband luxuries, or to bury her dead baby? Perhaps. Married ladies with bracelets do sometimes drift into poverty and have sick husbands to feed and dead babies to bury when there is no money in the house; and up stairs in a little drawer there lies still a treasured trinket, the last, perhaps, of many.

This one she has struggled hard to keep. She prizes it, perhaps, for old associations, for the sake of the giver, for the sake of the dear old days when it clasped her pretty round arm, and life seemed only a happy dream, all loving words and pretty things.

And now! Poor Mrs. Smith, she had found out what life

is. When she parted with this bracelet the loving words were seldom spoken, the light had died slowly out of the sky, the pretty things had gone one by one, and the grim spectre of want extended its greedy hands and claimed the last relic of the happy past.

Stay. Let us examine the bracelet more closely. See, there is an inscription inside. That accounts to some extent for the smallness of the sum advanced. An inscription depreciates the value. "From Frank to Milly, January 1st, 18—." A lover's new year's gift evidently.

Yes; this bracelet was a new year's gift, but we are wasting our sympathy over it. Rather, we are bestowing it on the person who least deserves it—the Mrs. Smith who put it down one March afternoon on the pawnbroker's counter and asked £2 upon it. Mrs. Smith was only a false name, the first name that came to the woman's lips.

Hearts were broken over that band of gold, but not hers. It can claim its dead, but she wots not of that. A young life in its flower lies crushed between the clasp of the glittering toy, shame and humiliation hover about it, and its story is one of temptation, crime, and bitter atonement.

But on the cold March afternoon when Mrs. Smith swung back the door, and passed under the shadow of the three brass balls, there was no romance about the transaction.

She was only a charwoman. Her young mistress was hard up, and had handed the bracelet to her, and told her to get a couple of pounds on it, that was all. It wasn't the first time she had pawned things for her young mistress, and probably it would not be the last.

To tell the truth, her young mistress, Mrs. Gordon, was just now under a cloud, and Mrs. Smith, the charwoman, counting up the number of things she had lately deposited

in safe keeping in return for a ticket and some ready cash, might be excused if she wondered how long it would last.

Not very long, evidently, for Mrs. Gordon wanted lots of money, and Mr. Gordon was not only in queer street, but he never came near the street where Mrs. Gordon resided.

“Poor Milly Gordon!” said folks who knew just half her story. “What a fool to go and marry a scamp like that, just when she was making her mark at the music-halls and getting a good salary.”

He was a scamp, there was no mistake about that. He was supposed to be a diamond merchant when he carried Milly off from all his rivals, gave her his hand, heart, and name, and started housekeeping in —— street, Oxford-street, in first-class style.

Three months afterwards everybody knew he was a rascal, a money-lender who never lent money, a bill discounter who took bills of foolish young men and discounted them. Yes, he certainly discounted them—but he kept the proceeds for himself.

It was a grand match for a young vocalist like Milly. His name was in the papers presently, and the whole story was out. Then he had to get out of the way for a while. He took all the jewellery he could, but Milly, who had learned a good deal in three months, had hidden half of it.

When he was hiding, he wrote to her and told her she'd better go on at the music-hall again. Not a bad idea, and he would claim all her earnings. Milly's mamma was a very clever woman, and she advised her daughter to wait a bit till the land was a little clearer. She hinted that a divorce might be possible from circumstances which had come to her knowledge, and in the meanwhile Milly had

better do with what she had left, and if she was short she must pawn some of her jewellery.

It was not jewellery that Mr. Gordon had given her. He had secured all that long ago. No, the jewellery referred to was some that Milly had before her marriage, presents which used to be left at the hall, or sent to the little suburban house, where she lived with mamma. Lots of presents went to that little suburban house. Mamma received them all and took care of them. Mamma also watched carefully over her talented daughter, and saw that her young affections were not trifled with.

Milly's mamma was reckoned rather a nuisance by the young gentlemen who were over head and ears in love with the pretty little songstress. It was such a dreadful blow to plan a nice little dinner and ask Milly, and then to receive a pretty little scented note accepting the invitation thus : "Ma and myself will be So gladd to dine with you to-morrer at the time menshuned."

Mamma always played gooseberry on those occasions. You see, she had set her mind on a good match. Her girl was not going to throw herself away and to get mixed up with a lot of young dandies who were all shirt-front and nothing much else to boast of. Money! Money! Money! That was mamma's idea. "Take all they like to give you, Milly," was her advice ; "but don't encourage them, my dear."

And Milly did not—except in one instance, and then there was no harm. He was such a pure-minded, innocent boy. He blushed when Milly spoke to him, he called her mother Madam, and he loved the girl with a love as pure and innocent as ever God planted in the breast of guileless youth.

Milly encouraged him, and mamma allowed her to. There was no harm likely to come of it—to Milly. As to the boy—well, that was his look out.

He didn't give grand dinners. He came to tea at the little suburban house. They didn't know quite how the acquaintance sprang up. He had been to the hall and seen Milly, and somehow had been introduced to her. He called and left flowers and fruit, and one day mamma asked him to tea.

Poor, merry, innocent Frank Ayrton! I can see your frank blue eyes and comely laughing face, beaming with happiness and love. I remember the night when you were pointed out to me at the chairman's table as "hard hit" by the lively Milly, and how I watched you, and, knowing what I knew, pitied you from the bottom of my heart.

Four years have gone by since that night. You are expiating in a far-off land the result of your blind infatuation for a heartless girl, and she—— Rain-soaked and tattered on the hoarding visible from my study window hangs a huge poster, and on it in capital letters I see the name of your old sweetheart, who is charming the golden youth of the music-halls with her silvery voice. You disappeared from the scene, Frank Ayrton, long before Mr. Gordon came. You had fluttered, poor moth, about the candle long enough. Your wings were scorched, and you had fallen to fly no more.

Ah, glittering gold bracelet, how meekly you lie in your velvet case, among the wreck and ruin of so many lives and homes—unredeemed pledges. Aye, unredeemed pledges of youth and manhood, of hope and love; unredeemed pledges of all that was so bright and fair once, and now is dark and desolate as the gloomy place wherein you lie.

Many a hand has touched you, O glittering toy, since the day that Frank Ayrton bought you in the jeweller's shop in Bond-street, and bore you joyously to the little suburban house, and, blushing and trembling, clasped you on a white and slender wrist, murmuring, "Wear this, Milly, for my sake."

She took his present. She kissed him. And the lad's heart leapt for joy.

One present bought a kiss ! From that moment the road of ruin lay before him. Blind, mad, he rushed along it. Love swept away all barriers. His own slender stock of money went in the wild race for bliss. He was but a City clerk, the hope and star of a widowed mother, the light of a humble little home, where brothers and sisters all toiled for the common weal.

All was neglected now. Business, mother, friends—one only claimed him—Milly.

The end came swiftly. The tale was told one evening when Milly was bidden to come to the manager's room. There was a man there whom she knew by sight—a detective. "Beg pardon, miss," said the man, "but has a young gent named Frank Ayrton given you much jewellery lately?"

"O, yes."

Milly rattled off such items as she chose to mention.

"Thank you ; that will do. He's been robbing his employers to a very large amount, and we only want to know where the money's gone."

It was very annoying, of course, but it was nothing to do with Milly or her mother. They knew he wasn't rich, this Frank Ayrton, but they were not to know he was robbing anybody to make presents of bracelets and necklaces and rings.

Some of the jewellery was given up after a deal of persuasion. Opinion, you see, was rather against Milly at the hall in this matter, and a certain sacrifice had to be made to opinion.

Among the things kept back was the gold bracelet, Frank's first valuable present. There was no sentiment about keeping it. The girl kept it because she liked it.

Frank Ayrton was condemned to a long period of penal servitude. With a white ashen face he heard the judge's awful sentence, and his lips moved in prayer. The court was hushed, and these words throbbed through the silence—

“God help my poor old mother!”

Aye, God help her, for man never could. She bowed her head in agony when they took her darling away, and her heart broke. Never a word of complaining, never a cry against those who had lured him to his fate, only a face growing thinner and thinner, and tearless eyes staring into the past and beholding the idol of her life, now an innocent child at her knee, and now the handsome youth on whose arm she leant as her steps grew feeble and her eyes grew dim.

All was over now. Never more in this world would the bright face flash its sunshine to her heart—never more would the kindly hand press hers. Lost—lost for ever more.

Her other children came about her, and she smiled faintly, but her life was chilled. There was no warmth anywhere. She was deaf—for she could not hear her boy—and was blind, for she could not see his face. In God's mercy the last great darkness closed about her soon, and then the fond heart ceased to ache. When the last breath struggled from

its poor case of clay it bore a name with it up to the throne of God.

That name was Frank.

* * * * *

It was when Milly Gordon, deserted by the broken-down swindler she had married, was searching her jewels to see which she best could spare that she came upon the gold bracelet.

“Hullo!” she said; “I’d forgotten that. It’s the one that gaby Frank Ayrton gave me. Poor fool! Here, Nance, take this with you when you go out presently, and get a couple of pounds on it.”

And there it lies to-day, unredeemed. The time has gone by, and now it will be sold.

O, gleaming band of gold, what will be your fate? Who knows? To go forth into the world again and deck the white flesh of wanton arms, to tempt folly and to pay vice? Who knows?

Perhaps the eye of love, honest and true, may light upon you. The inscription may be erased, and you may clasp the wrist of a sweet young wife; faith and purity may hallow the memento of a lad’s o’er-tempted love and a mother’s broken heart.

The woman who wore you once, and wrought the ruin that seems as I gaze upon you to fling its shadow over your shining face, has never missed you, has never thought of you since she flung you to the old charwoman to pawn for the pounds she wasted a short hour afterwards.

Only a gold bracelet, lying among the unredeemed pledges in a pawnbroker’s shop, and this is its story.

PLEDGE II.

A FLANNEL PETTICOAT.

AN old worn-out flannel petticoat! The merest trifle lent upon it—just a few coppers. The date on the ticket shows that it was on the coldest day of last winter that some wretched creature parted with it—came shivering through the raw, biting air, with this, almost her last garment, to change it for a crust to eat.

The snow lay thick on the streets of London town that cruel winter day, the keen east wind seized belated wayfarers by the throat, and the faces of healthy, well-fed folks were blue, and their teeth chattered as, comfortably clad, they hurried along. But they thought thankfully of the snug home and cheery fire that would greet them at their journey's end, and only walked faster and drew their comforters more tightly round them.

Down in Balder's-gardens—gardens where the weeds grow rankest, and flowers there are none—gardens where the foulest filth lies thick and disease in its myriad forms blossoms luxuriantly in the fattening soil—down in Balder's-gardens the demon of fever was abroad, and Death was reaping a ripe harvest.

In the back room on the ground floor of one of the houses were three people. On a heap of rags lay a man in the last stage of consumption. In the opposite corner lay a dead child, and over it bent a woman rocking herself to and fro in an agony of grief, and muttering unintelligible words.

A foul stench pervaded the atmosphere—the room was an inch thick in dirt and fungi caused by damp. The floor was rotten. Great patches of the ceiling were gone, and all was ruin and decay.

“Meg!”

From the heap of rags came the voice, and the woman left her dead baby and went over to the man.

“Meg, prop us up a bit, will you?”

The woman stooped down and drew her husband up so that his back rested against the horrible wall.

“Meg, it won’t be long now before I’m gone. You ain’t goin’ out any more to-day, are you?”

The woman stooped down, and as she did so the dying man lifted his arm and put it about her neck.

O, such a thin, wasted arm. An arm that told how fell had been the ravages of the disease whose work was well nigh done.

“Meg, dear,” whispered the man in a faint, weak voice, “stay with me now. Don’t let me die alone.”

The woman, who had dried her streaming eyes when she came to her husband’s side, broke down, and pressing her lips on the clammy brow, let her hot tears rain over his wan white face.

“Don’t, Meg, don’t,” he cried. “Bear up, my brave lass. Why should you cry? I shall be well off soon. I shall be where there’s no more hunger and cold and suffering. I shall be where the poor bairn’s gone, thank God, before me.”

“And I shall be left alone!”

There was a tone of reproach in the woman’s voice. She couldn’t help it. A moment afterwards she had laid the man’s head on her trembling breast and was soothing him.

"Won't you try and lie still, dear," she said, "while I go and get you something?"

"Where can you get anything, Meg? I don't want anything."

"You are hungry, Jem, ain't you?"

The man smiled a faint, sickly smile.

"No, dear, not very. I can last till—till I die."

"Don't talk like that, Jem. You may live days yet if—"

"If I have nourishing things—yes, I know. No, Meg, I wouldn't die with that crime on my soul. Do you think I would rob you of the last rag you have left that I might endure a few days more of anguish? Do you think I don't know," he cried, raising his voice excitedly, "how you've got the things I've had already? How you've robbed yourself, bit by bit, of every vestige of comfort that I might eat? Haven't you pawned nearly every rag on your back?"

"No, really I haven't, dear. Don't you fancy that, Jem. It's your things I've pawned because—"

"Because you knew I'd never want 'em again. Quite right, Meg, I never shall!"

"Let me go out now, Jem; I want to go about burying poor baby, and when I come back you shall have a cup of tea."

The man's bright eyes, bright with the inward flame that was consuming him, grew brighter still. A cup of tea!

Racked with pain, faint and hungry, and feverish, with his lips dry and cracking, his tongue glued to his mouth, and yet his body blue with the piercing cold that swept through crack and crevice and broken pane, his wife spoke to him of a cup of tea!

She noticed the look—she read its meaning. Amid all her agony, the loss of her poor baby, the sight of her

husband dying in this scene of horror slowly before her eyes, and her own cruel torture, which she hid as well as she could, there came a ray of sunshine to her. She had found out something that would give him one moment's ease—something he would like—a cup of tea.

He should have it. Her poor clothes, every stick of furniture, every mean little thing on which a copper could be raised, had gone during the weary months Jem Summershad been slowly dying; but she vowed that he should have his cup of tea.

They had paid their last farthing the day before to the landlord of this vile hovel, for he granted no delay. Foul and pestilent as the dens were, they were in eager demand among the wretched waifs and strays of the mighty city, and it was a case of pay or go—pay or be turned out, sick, dying, or dead, into the streets.

Since then Meg Summers had not tasted food. Her baby died in her arms in the night, its last faint cry being for the nourishment she could not give it.

For hours it lay quiet and still in her weak arms, and when the first faint light fought its way through the dirt and filth of Balder's-gardens and fell upon its pinched and waxen face she saw that it was dead.

And the man tossed to and fro on the rags, and murmured in his sleep of the old days when they had a snug little shop, and the customers called his wife "Pretty Mrs. Summers."

So she was pretty, and no one knew it better than Jem, who was never so proud as when they went to Hampstead or the Green Lanes on Sunday and the folks turned round and looked at her.

Ah, that was all long, long ago. Before trade got bad,

and Jem borrowed that £50, and gave a bill of sale, and then became ill and couldn't attend to business, and trade fell off and the instalments were not kept up, and at last the vultures swooped down upon their prey, and swept away all he had in the world for a balance of £20.

Then the struggle began. It was a hard fight for life, and Jem was consumptive and got worse and worse, and at last was too weak to fight at all, and Meg had the baby, and fell ill herself, and so they drifted down till they got to Balder's-gardens, and paid three shillings a week for the death-trap they now lived—lived! say rather died by inches—in.

At first Jem got 1s. 3d. a day for walking about the streets dressed up as a sailor with a theatrical board on his back.

Poor sailor! The theatre people gave him the suit, but it was cut low down, to show the chest, like a blue-jacket's should be, and the cold winds soon made an end of his being a sailor, and though the suit kept his body warm he had to take it off at night and put on his own threadbare rags.

When he couldn't move, but was taken for death, and lay with a hacking cough and a wasting body on the heap of rags, Meg tried to go out and earn a penny, and the baby was nursed by its dying father.

But Meg earned so little she had to part with her clothes to get sufficient food for Jem, and at last she got so shabby and wretched the only work she could do was taken from her. She had sunk too low to be employed by respectable people.

The cruel demon of starvation came nearer and nearer. Her child fell ill, and she tried to hide the worst from the poor heart-broken wreck of humanity whose life was ebbing

fast in the foul damp corner where he lay and starved—and thought.

He pretended not to be hungry, he said that food made him sick.

It was a noble lie.

A fierce hunger and a wild thirst added to the spasms of pain which he endured without a murmur.

The craving for food he conquered, the burning thirst he could not.

When he cried aloud for drink, at first Meg brought him water—water from the foul reservoir which supplies these festering dens—water which is full of nameless abominations, which is more deadly than the costly poison of the Borgias—the water which God gives freely and which man in his vile greed has made a terror and a curse.*

The poor wretch turned, parched and feverish as he was, from the foul-smelling liquid, and then Meg brightened up suddenly, and asked him if he would like some tea.

She pawned something, Heaven knows what. Perhaps, God help her! some little rag that she thought the dying baby at her breast might spare for its dying father's sake, and got him the tea.

How he enjoyed the poor mixture which she brought in a broken jug from the coffee-shop opposite the Gardens! She couldn't make any herself. There were no coals, no kettle, no anything—not even water that she could touch.

It revived him and nerved him, and gave him new

* The locality inhabited by these people was recently visited, and was more horrible in fact than the writer has here made it appear. The water supply existed under conditions which it is quite impossible to describe. Yet in one of these dilapidated rookeries over forty people were living, and the landlord realised the sum of £1 15s. a week.

strength, vile wash as it was, and he left some at the bottom of the jug and made Meg drink it, and kissed her.

Now again to-day she sees the thirst is on him, and she promises him the tea.

For a crust or two for him and herself she has stripped her poor limbs of almost everything. The last remnant she has to keep her from the pinching cold is an old flannel petticoat which a good soul gave her where last she worked.

She kisses her husband, covers the poor dead baby reverently with a tattered apron, and goes out into the cruel blast.

“I’ll be back, dear, directly,” she says at the door; then shuffles away as fast as her weak limbs will carry her.

She runs into a dark passage in the Gardens, slips the petticoat off, wraps it in a piece of newspaper she has brought with her, and hastens to the last haven of poverty.

With a beating heart she dives past the three brass balls into one of the pawnbroker’s dark little boxes, and puts the parcel down. She half fears it is so old and worn they will refuse it.

The assistant knows her. She has come from time to time with her wardrobe, yielding it up bit by bit, and he can read her story. He has seen many a home go, and he knows by the order in which articles come what is reckless unthrift and what is absolute misery.

He is a decent-hearted fellow; he pities her. He just tears a bit of the paper aside and looks at the contents.

“How much, missus?”

“The most you can, sir,” says Meg, eagerly; “the most you can.” Then she trembles, waiting for her fate.

The pawnbroker’s assistant looks at her poor pinched

face for a moment, then at the blinding snow driving against the window-pane.

He hesitates a moment, then makes out a ticket, and flings the pledge behind the counter.

But he doesn't go to the till for the money ; he fumbles a second or two in his pocket and flings half-a-crown on the counter.

"There you are, missus. Now then, mum, what's for you ?"

This to a drunken Irishwoman, who has tumbled in with a bundle of clothes under her arm.

Meg can hardly believe her eyes. Half-a-crown for her poor worn-out old rag. She stammers something, and rushes out of the shop. The joy is almost too much for her, and the tears stream down her poor, thin face.

It is a wonderful advance on such a rag, and Meg may well be astonished. She was more astonished still when she looked at the ticket and found it was made out for fourpence.

Then she knew that God had moved even the heart of a pawnbroker's assistant to pity her misery, and she looked up at the lowering heavens standing under the shadow of the golden balls, and her lips murmured a blessing on her benefactor.

She hurried along as fast as she could, for she had nothing on now but her thin shawl, her threadbare, ragged cotton dress, and a few old thin rags, the patched and worthless remains of what had been clothes once.

The bitter cold cut her to the heart, and weak with long vigils and the want of food, the strong wind almost took away her senses. It seemed as though she must sit down somewhere and give up, shut her eyes, and let the snow and

wind do their worst. But she clutched her half-crown and thought of Jem, lying and moaning in their wretched home all alone, and of what the bright silver piece would buy him, and she took courage and struggled on.

Only for a little way. The cold blowing on to her forehead made her head so queer—O so queer. Everything was going round—houses, streets, cabs, and people—O so fast, and the snow, too, seemed like a white circle, and the people were black dots in it.

Meg staggered up against some railings and she clutched them—she tried to stand still. O, if the streets wouldn't whirl round her so fast she should be better.

How strange it all was. She wanted to get home to Jem. Now the ground heaved up to her and sank down. She was as light as air. She was going up, up, up into the sky, and everything was dancing for joy.

“Jem! J——!”

The word died on her lips, her head went down upon her breast, and she sank down a huddled-up mass of rags upon the snowy pavement, and the half-crown dropped from her clenched fingers and rolled away into the gutter's half-frozen slush.

* * * * *

“Now then, missus—none o' this!”

The policeman got no answer. There was something breathing in the rags he bent over, but it had no voice.

“What's the matter?” asked an elderly ruddy-faced gentleman, as he elbowed his way through a crowd of idlers, who had gathered about the spot.

“Only a woman, sir,” said the policeman.

“Drunk?”

“I dessay. Here, missus, come—arn't you well?”

The policeman tried to pull Meg up. She never opened her eyes. Catching hold of her wrist the pawn-ticket fell from her hand.

The policeman read it.

“Ah!” he said. “Guessed as much. Pawned her petticoat for fourpence and got drunk with the money. That’s about it.”

“Dreadful!” muttered the old gentleman; “shocking! The poor are shamefully improvident. What are you going to do with her?”

The policeman had decided what to do without being asked. Presently the stretcher came, and Meg was carried off to the station as a drunken woman found in the streets, and was put in a cell.

In an hour the police-surgeon arrived, and was having a chat with the inspector and a warm at the fire, when the inspector remembered there was a woman insensible in one of the cells.

“There was a woman brought in drunk just now, doctor,” he said, “I think perhaps you had better have a look at her.”

The doctor went. He didn’t have to look long to see what was the matter with Meg. She was only dead—that was all.

Hunger and cold had done their work, and the poor weak loving heart had stopped for ever.

That evening, at dinner, a nice old gentleman with a ruddy face told his wife how he’d seen a woman lying in the streets who had actually pawned her flannel petticoat and got dead drunk with the money.

And in the parish mortuary, cold and stiff, with her glazed eyes upturned, and her poor rags frozen and filthy with the

stain of the slush, lay the hapless wretch whose errand of love had terminated so miserably.

* * * * *

Jem Summers waited and waited. The afternoon waned and night came on, and still no Meg. He called her with his feeble voice, and never a sound answered him. Once he fell off in a fitful sleep, and woke thinking he heard her breathing in a corner of the room.

He crept out of the rags and crawled painfully across the filthy floor, dabbling with his hands in the damp and decay, and trying to find where she lay.

Presently he came upon the cold dead body of his child, and touched it.

In his weakness a great terror came upon him—a terror of being alone with death. “Meg!” he cried; “Meg! where are you?”

He knew something dreadful must have happened. She must be dead. O God, if she were dead he was alone in the world—alone and dying, with never a voice that he knew to speak the last farewell to him.

He couldn’t stop there. He had a vague fear even of the dead child, though it was his own.

He would go out. He would go into the street, and look for her.

The man was mad now—mad with grief, despair, and terror.

The excitement gave him a strength long foreign to his limbs.

He had only a few rags about his body; he seized the heap in the corner and flung them about him, and tottered into the alley, and so out into the street.

The people in the Gardens saw him go by. “Hullo!”

said one, "there's another one mad with the fever ; who's that ?" Nobody knew, nobody cared. The shout of delirium and the wild action of the maniac were common enough in Balder's-gardens.

Sometimes the folks that ran about shrieking and brandishing weapons were only drunk, sometimes they were mad ; Balder's-gardens didn't much care which it was.

Jem Summers rushed along shouting for Meg. Nobody stopped him in the Gardens, but out in the street a policeman saw him, heard him shrieking, and gave chase.

It was a weird, strange sight, the wild figure in the loathsome rags rushing madly through the gaslit streets, now up this turning, now down that, the people standing aside to let the madman pass ; none knowing what weapon he carried in his hand.

At last the policeman came up close to him and clutched him.

With a wild yell the maniac tore himself loose and plunged across the road.

At that moment a heavily-laden waggon turned the corner swiftly.

* * * * *

"Dash it all!" said the police-surgeon, "that's two fatal cases I've had to-day. Poor devil! What a rum creature he looks! Better put him in the deadhouse with the woman."

So it came about that side by side in the dismal parish deadhouse lay Jem Summers and his wife. No one knew that a strange chance had united them in death.

They were buried as nameless and unknown. Who would trouble to find out the history of two such ragged wretches as these dead outcasts? And by-and-by the

papers came out with a beautifully harrowing paragraph of a dead baby found in a den in Balder's-gardens, whose wretched parents had decamped and left it.

This is not a nice story or a pretty story. The stories of the ragged flannel petticoats that are pawned on a bitter winter's day are not pretty as a rule.

PLEDGE III.

A DIAMOND RING.

IT was brought in on a very foggy night, and just as the pawnbroker was closing. It was quite a gentleman, who came in quietly, drew his glove off, removed the ring, and asked ten pounds on it.

The money was lent directly. It was only a gipsy ring for the little finger, with a single stone, but it was worth treble that amount.

The gentleman gave the name of John Smith, put the duplicate and the gold into his pocket together, and walked out into the fog. A little way up the street a four-wheeled cab was waiting, and the face of a lady deeply veiled was peering anxiously from the window.

The gentleman jumped in, saying to the driver, “London Bridge as quick as you can.” The man whipped his horse, and away they went jolting over the London stones.

“It’s the most stupid thing in the world, my darling,” said the gentleman presently, to his companion; “in the hurry and confusion I came away without any ready money.”

The lady was alarmed. She had the appearance of having been in a terrible state of agitation for some time past.

“Will that cause any delay?—any——”

The gentleman took her hand reassuringly. “What a frightened goose it is, to be sure! Not a bit. I’ve borrowed

ten pounds of a—of a friend. I've letters of credit with me and my cheque-book, but like a stupid I put all my bank-notes in the portmanteau, and that's gone on and registered by now, and I couldn't open it at the station."

"Do you think we shall be seen by anyone at the station?"

"Not a chance of it. If we'd gone by the mail route, it's ten to one we might have had a fellow passenger who would have recognised one or other of us. That's why I chose Newhaven and Dieppe."

"Oh, Hubert, if *he* comes after us and there is a scene, I shall die."

"My dear, how can he? He won't leave the House till after midnight. It is sure to be a late sitting, and by the time he gets home and finds the little bird flown, we shall be half-way across the Channel."

The lady clasped the young man's arm and looked up into his face with earnest, pleading eyes.

"Hubert, you will be faithful and true to me? I have sacrificed all for you. If you betray my trust, I shall die."

The young man flung his arm around the woman's waist and drew her closer to him, till her head rested on his shoulder. Then he stooped down and, raising her veil, kissed her trembling lips passionately.

"My darling, trust in me. Your new life begins to-night. From this hour the arm that enfolds you is sacred to you, and you alone, for ever."

* * * * *

At London Bridge the Newhaven and Dieppe train was up at the platform.

A lady deeply veiled and leaning on the arm of Mr. John

Smith passed through the barrier and took her seat in a first-class carriage labelled "Reserved."

The gentleman saw her comfortably seated in the far corner, and then, bidding her not be nervous, hurried back to the platform.

He looked about for a minute; then a man, who appeared to be a gentleman's servant, came up and touched his hat.

"Is it all right, Griffiths?" asked Mr. Smith, drawing the man aside.

"Yes, my lord. The luggage is all in, and registered in the name of Smith. Here's the ticket."

"Right. Now you know what to do. Get full particulars of what happens, find out all you can from the servants, wire me at once, and then come over by the mail to-morrow night."

"Yes, my lord."

"Oh, by-the-by, Griffiths, I came away without any loose cash, and had to pawn my ring for the fare."

"Nonsense, my lord!"

The idea of his lordship having to pawn anything was so ludicrous, that in spite of the gravity of the present situation Griffiths burst out all over broad grins.

Even Mr. Smith, who was called "My lord," smiled as he said, "Indeed I did, Griffiths. You had better take the ticket and get it out to-morrow, and bring it with you. The cheque I gave you this afternoon will cover it."

"Yes, my lord."

Mr. Smith fumbled about in his pockets, first in one, then in the other, but nowhere was the ticket to be found.

"Dash it all! I must have dropped it in the cab, or in getting out."

Everywhere that it was possible for the ticket to be, Mr.

Smith felt, and he was still rummaging among papers, letters, keys, and pocket-books when a bell rang, and the inspector at the barrier called out—

“Any more for the boat train?”

Mr. Smith ceased fumbling in his pockets, buttoned up his coat, gave a few hurried instructions to his valet—for such was the honourable position Mr. Griffiths held—and then with a last “Mind you do exactly what I’ve told you,” dashed through the barrier and took his seat in the reserved compartment opposite the veiled lady.

The train steamed out of the station and rushed along the iron road into the night, carrying with it many an actor in some weird life drama.

And as it started on its swift journey to the sea, Mr. Griffiths stood and looked after it, and murmured—

“Won’t there be a jolly rumpus in London to-morrow over this night’s work!”

* * * * *

The House of Commons sat until one o’clock in the morning. At that hour the pleasant little political club which amuses itself with the affairs of the nation broke up, and the great majority of the members made their way home.

Mr. Charles Tredennick, M.P., leaning back in his brougham, and being whirled rapidly towards Belgravia, was not very happy in his mind. He idolised his wife and children, and had all his life found his greatest delight in his domestic circle. It was over that circle that of late the clouds had gathered.

He was terribly troubled in his mind about his wife.

He was not a jealous man, but the persistent attentions of a certain noble lord to Mrs. Tredennick had been ob-

served by others. Everything that a man could do to make a woman happy he had done, but latterly a coldness had sprung up between them. Sometimes he blamed himself for his uneasiness. He felt that it was an insult to her to believe that a woman surrounded with every safeguard, and the mother of three beautiful little children, could ever listen for a moment to the voice of the tempter.

He called himself an old fool for being frightened of a dandy—a vain, empty-headed lady-killer, and determined to think no more of it.

But in spite of himself the horrible thought of danger would present itself. To-night or rather this morning, as he neared his home, the desponding fit was on him, and he could not shake it off.

His wife's conduct had altered strangely. His lordship had ceased his noticeable attentions, it was true, but he had come upon his wife once or twice with tears in her eyes. Once he found her sobbing by the bedside of her eldest daughter, a sweet child of seven, who was weak and ailing, and at other times she had seemed strangely agitated, and had avoided him when he had tried to talk with her.

Arrived at home he went straight to the drawing-room, expecting to find his wife there. The room was in darkness. The maid passed him on the staircase.

“Parker, has your mistress gone to bed?”

“No, sir, mistress is out.”

“Out!”

“Yes, sir. There is a note for you in your study.”

A note! What could it mean? His face went white as death. His heart almost stood still.

Recovering himself, lest the girl should suspect something, he tottered rather than walked to his study.

There on his desk lay a letter. The handwriting was hers, but how her hand had trembled!

A sick, giddy feeling came over him as with trembling fingers he tore it open to read his fate:—

“My Husband,—Forget me, I am unworthy of your great love. Tell my children I am dead. I can bear this hideous mockery no longer. Proclaim my shame to the world, and leave me free as I leave you.—Your unfaithful wife, DORA.”

With a wild cry of anguish, Charles Tredennick buried his face in his hands and sobbed like a child.

* * * * *

“Dora, for the children’s sake I ask it.”

The speaker was Mr. Tredennick. Those who had not seen him lately might have doubted it.

The terrible shock of his wife’s flight had added ten years to his appearance.

He had found out all in time, had followed the guilty pair, and surprised them in their quiet apartments in the Avenue de la Reine, Champs Elysees, which they occupied as Mr. and Mrs. John Smith.

At first the young nobleman, seeing who his visitor was, had been taken by surprise and had lost his self-possession, but gradually his habitual composure returned, and he sat calmly waiting until, the interview between husband and wife being ended, he might hear what arrangements were necessary for that satisfaction which injured husbands have a right to demand.

Charles Tredennick took no notice of the destroyer of all he held dearest in life; he spoke only to the woman who was the mother of his children.

She, too, had been terrified at first, and her face was ghastly white.

“Dora,” he said again, “do you hear me? Nothing is known by the world yet. For the sake of our children, whose future your shame will taint, come home with me.”

Slowly the woman raised her eyes and looked her husband in the face:—

“No. I cannot. It is too late.”

“It is not too late. For your sake and the children’s I will play a comedy. For them and for you I will still before the world be your trusting, loving husband. I will forgive and forget all. The dictates of love shall silence the voice of honour and of self-respect. Come back to my roof.”

“Never!”

“You wish to be free—free to marry this—this scoundrel!”

The young aristocrat sprang from his seat with a flushed face. Then with an effort he conquered his passion, and said quietly—

“You have a right to insult me, Mr. Tredennick: use that right to its fullest extent.”

Mrs. Tredennick came across the room to her lover and took his arm.

“Listen, Charles Tredennick. You are a good man and I am a wicked woman. I weighed all the consequences of my act before I left your house. I have never loved you—I love this man. As you are so noble and so generous, leave me free to marry him.”

“And the children?”

“Will be saved from the contamination of my presence. Sue for your divorce, for their sake as for mine. Their mother will then be a nobleman’s wife, not a nobleman’s mistress.”

“What this lady says is quite right, Mr. Tredennick. What sin and shame there is your generous act would never

undo. Leave the lady free, and I will make her my lawful wife before God and man."

"On your hon—"

Charles Tredennick stopped, and a bitter smile crossed his lips :—

"On your oath, I should say, my lord."

"On my oath."

"Enough. Dora, if aught in my conduct has brought you to this wretched act, may God forgive me. I would sooner have seen you cold and lifeless in your coffin than see you as you are now. Henceforward, we are dead to each other. The children you have forfeited are mine alone. I will, with God's help, shield them from the consequences of their mother's act."

He walked across the room. At the door he turned and looked earnestly at his lost wife.

"Dora, farewell. You shall have the liberty you desire, and may you never regret the choice you have made. Your future is in God's hands and your own. Good-bye."

* * * * *

"Tredennick v Tredennick and ——" was the talk of London for more than the usual nine days. Then it was forgotten in a fresh scandal.

The man for whom Dora Tredennick had sacrificed herself redeemed his word, and wedded her directly the divorce was pronounced, and before the world she seemed a happy woman.

But she had been a mother, and now that the mad passion which had carried her away had cooled with time, she missed the soft caressing hands of her children.

Her new husband was as kind and gentle as his nature and his training would let him be. He did not altogether

regret his chivalrous action (his own words, not mine), but he didn't care to settle down to humdrum turtle-dove business, especially as at times he found, though the Church had given them its blessing, they were not received everywhere with open arms. He was, of course, but the wife was occasionally cold-shouldered.

Once or twice his pride had a severe wound in this way, and he began to think he had made a great sacrifice. Her ladyship, too, was in a bad state of health, and had grown dull, and was not a cheerful companion. He got discontented and had fits of blue devils, and so to drive them away took to his old haunts and companions again.

One of his old haunts was a little theatre at the West where the ladies were more remarkable for their splendid figures than for their brilliant talents.

One night at this house, the hundredth night of a piece was celebrated by a supper, at which rank and beauty were lavishly represented. The gentlemen contributed the rank, and the ladies the beauty. Talent was invited, but most of it had a cold and couldn't come.

Lord —— sat at supper by a dashing young lady who was one of the goddesses in the mythological burlesque which was in the bills. She was a talkative goddess, and was extremely confidential with her neighbour.

While she was chatting, she made a liberal use of her arms and hands to show her bracelets and rings.

One ring particularly attracted the attention of his lordship.

It was a gentleman's diamond ring, and he recognised it in a moment.

“ By Jove, where did you get that from ? ”

The question was so abrupt the girl was flung off her guard.



"Father picked the ticket up in his cab ever so long ago, and I took it out."

There was a roar of laughter from the young ladies opposite. "Father's cab" was a secret which the goddess had not hitherto divulged to her fellow deities.

She waxed wroth and her face went red.

"You needn't grin and show your false teeth, Martha Higgins, as calls yourself Evar de Mountmerency. Your father's a chimbley-sweep."

There was a cry of indignation from the De Montmorency, and a glass of champagne was hurled in the face of the slanderous goddess.

The gentlemen jumped up, the ladies shrieked, and as there seemed every probability of a free fight, his lordship, not knowing what might be the end of it, thought it prudent to withdraw and leave the question of his ring till he had another opportunity of seeing Miss Dolly Dalrymple (the goddess) under more auspicious circumstances.

* * * * *

A time of peril was approaching for Lady _____. She was about to become a mother. As the hour of her travail drew near a dread terror fell upon her that she should not survive it.

She felt miserable, lonely, and ill at ease. The loving arm that should have been hers to lean on was rarely near her now. Her husband sought his pleasures far from home.

Sitting in her room after he had given her a careless kiss and gone off to his midnight haunts, with a hint he should not be home till "late," she thought of how differently her other husband had treated her at such a time.

Her heart was filled with a strange yearning to see him once again—to see him and her children.

She felt so lonely now. Oh, if she could only have felt the clasp of his loving hand ; if she could only have heard her little children murmur her name. But that was impossible. A yawning abyss separated the old life from the new. Her husband was away with his gay companions, her child had yet to be born.

She had asked her husband to stay with her this evening. He had muttered a few words—said he had an engagement. “Wouldn’t to-morrow do ?”

“ Oh yes, to-morrow would do.”

She sighed as he closed the door, and her eyes filled with tears. Presently she moved across the room to get a book, and lying on the floor just where her husband had stood she saw a crumpled piece of paper.

She picked it up.

It was a note, scented with patchouli, and written in a big round scrawl :—

“ Dere Ole boy,—Me and Lotty Vaversour gives a supper tonite at the G—— Resteront. The Markis and Gustus and Lord Halfrid is comin will you make one and then we can tork about the dimind ring as you want back agin & come to tirms. Come to my dressin room tonite early to say if youre comin as hutherwise I shall have to ast sumboddy else to make up the partey —Yours ever faithfull DOLLY DALRYMPLE.”

Her ladyship had no idea that this insolent familiarity meant nothing. She did not know that her husband had merely asked this young woman to sell him back the diamond ring which had accidentally come into her possession, and that the jade had seized the opportunity to show him off at a supper party to her male and female friends as one of her “ conquests.”

The poor lady, wretched and desponding, sick at heart and full of vague apprehensions concerning the terrible ordeal through which she was so soon to pass, read in it only that her husband had given a diamond ring to some worthless woman, that he wanted it back, and that on the night when she had asked him to stay with her and cheer her drooping heart he had gone out to sup with this creature and her companions.

She read the note through, then dropped it as though its touch were contagion. She buried her face in her hands and moaned aloud, "O merciful God! It is for a man like this that I have sacrificed so much."

Late that night a doctor was sent for in all haste.

Up in the great bed-room, surrounded by all the pomps of the upholsterer's art, my lady lay, with a white face and restless eyes.

She was very ill.

The attendants moved noiselessly about the room, the doctor with a grave face gave whispered directions, and came again and again to the bedside of the patient.

The crisis was passed, and by her side there lay a feeble little mite of humanity that every now and then raised its tiny voice.

She would have it there—there, near her, where she could touch it.

She had said as much once, but now she could not raise her voice. She only spoke with her eyes.

It was far into the night, and the doctor looked anxiously at his watch. He had sent for her ladyship's husband, for he knew that the poor creature was sinking—that, in spite of all that skill could do, her life was ebbing fast.

They had sent to his lordship's club, but he was not there. No one knew where to go.

The dying wife, could she have spoken, might have said where he was, but she made no sign. Only the sorrowful eyes turned now and then from the baby by her side to the door, as though waiting for someone to enter.

At five in the morning he came home. His man told him down stairs what was the matter, and he had a basin of water brought and dashed his head into it, for the Dalrymple supper had been a "wet" one.

Then, with a great effort steadyng his disobedient limbs, he climbed the stairs and staggered into the bed-room.

He was shocked at the news he had heard; it had sobered his brain, but his legs and arms were drunk still.

He rolled a little as he crept on tiptoe to the bedside where the woman who had given up so much for him lay dying.

She opened her eyes and looked at him with a strange look that will haunt him all his life.

It was not reproach, it was not anger; it was a look of unutterable despair.

He laid his hand gently on her pillow, and as he did so her eyes fixed themselves on the diamond ring that glistened on his finger.

Speech never returned to her. In the morning she was unconscious, and at noon she was dead.

In her last hours it is probable that her whole life came back to her, and, sinking into eternity, she saw what she had lost.

And strangely enough, the diamond ring which had been pawned on the evening of her guilty flight, and of which she knew nothing, was the Nemesis that came to her death-bed side, and gave the last pang to her broken heart.

PLEDGE IV.

A SUIT OF BLACK.

JACK WORRALL woke up very queer and miserable.

It was Sunday morning, the morning to which he always looked forward with pleasure after a hard week's work.

Generally he was up with the daylight and off to the public baths, where he had a nice invigorating swim, and felt clean and Sundayfied, and then he came back and had breakfast with the missus, put on his Sunday clothes, and went out for a walk with his chums while the missus got the dinner ready.

Sunday *was* a day of rest to him, and he enjoyed it better than any gentleman in the land did. The close, grimy atmosphere of the workshop was exchanged for the beautiful pure air and the green fields and the blue sky. On fine Sundays Jack always got a little way out to the Cockney country, a poor, dirty, withered, crowded country, it is true, but still beautiful to the eyes of the city toiler in close workshop pent.

Jack didn't drink. He didn't count it a virtue, but he had never had the appetite. He didn't *like* beer, and he couldn't afford wine.

Sometimes on a Sunday when Jack was out for a walk with his mates they would ask him to come and be a *bona-fide* traveller, and have a "beer."

"No, thanks, lads," Jack would say. "You go and have

your beer ; I'll stop outside and have another mouthful of champagne."

The fresh air was Jack's champagne, and a right good brand it is. It runs through your veins and quickens your pulse. It sets your cheeks tingling pleasantly, and makes you feel so light and merry, and there's no headache after it.

O glorious vintage of God's champagne, the pure sweet air, even you are becoming an expensive luxury now, and we must go farther and farther afield to find you.

Now, this Sunday morning, Jack, who generally woke refreshed from his slumber and jumped out of bed to see what the weather was like, felt very strange and queer. He had a dim recollection of something unpleasant having occurred the previous evening, and suddenly the scene came back to him.

He had had a terrible quarrel with his wife ; the first real thunderstorm had disturbed the atmosphere of his home.

She lay by his side, still asleep. She was breathing heavily, and Jack sat up in bed and looked at her face with a pained, worried look.

"Missus," he said presently, nudging her with his elbow, "how are ye this morning?"

The woman opened her eyes and looked at him stupidly.

"All right, Jack, only my head aches."

"Well, lie in bed, my lass, and I'll get up and make ye something before I go to the baths."

"Thank you, Jack."

Mrs. Worrall turned her face to the wall again, and closed her eyes, and Jack slipped on his working clothes and went down into the kitchen.

He lit the fire and tidied up a bit ; then, when the water

boiled, he made a nice cup of hot strong tea, and took it to the bed-room.

“Here you are, old lady, drink this, and you’ll be all right.”

Mrs. Worrall took the proffered cup and raised it eagerly to her lips.

Then Jack, bidding her make haste up and see to his breakfast and put his Sunday clothes out, went off to the public baths.

Directly he was out of the room Mrs. Worrall began to moan.

She was a comely woman of about two-and-thirty, dark, and broad-shouldered—not at all the sort of woman you would expect to be nervous, but her hand trembled as she put down the cup her husband had given her.

“Lor’, how bad I do feel!” she moaned. “I feel all shivery shakey, and my head’s regular splitting.”

Mrs. Worrall stooped down and drew from a narrow place between the bed and the wall something that had evidently been put there to be out of sight.

It was a flat bottle, half full of spirit.

“I must have a drop,” sighed Mrs. Worrall, “or I’ll never be able to get up.”

She poured out a little into the tea, and then drank the mixture off.

She felt revived, and smacked her lips.

“Won’t there be a row when he finds out about his best clothes!” she muttered, hurrying on her things. “Well, I can’t help it. He must row.”

* * * * *

Jack came back from the baths and found his breakfast ready.

Generally it was the most comfortable meal of the week, this Sunday morning breakfast, for he had time to sit and talk to his wife, and read her all the interesting little bits out of the paper.

But this morning the conversation flagged. Jack hadn't the heart to talk, for the scene of the previous night was uppermost in his mind.

His wife had gone out to market and come home drunk. Yes, absolutely drunk. He had noticed lately that sometimes of an evening she was a little flurried and excited, and didn't seem to know quite what she was doing, and once or twice he had been on the point of advising her to give up her beer, as he thought it muddled her, but last night was a revelation.

His Polly that he was so proud of, that was always clean and neat and respectable, and "quite the lady" in her ways, had come home drunk.

Jack spoke out then, kindly but firmly. He had a horror of drunken people; even with his companions if one of them got the worse for liquor he always wanted to run away; and to have the horror forced upon him under his own roof was too much.

When Mrs. Worrall, with a flushed face, began to argue with him in a silly, maudlin way, Jack got rightdown angry. Then she got angry too, and raised her voice and screamed at him, and at last there was a real row.

Jack took his wife by the shoulders and looked straight in her eyes.

"Look here, missus. Once, and for all, I won't have it. I know what Saturday night drinking means; it's the beginning of ruin. It means the roof off our heads and the

clothes off our backs. If you spend your money that way, I shall do the marketing myself."

Mrs. Worrall stared stupidly at her husband, and then had a good cry, which seemed to do her good, for presently she settled down into sulky quietude, and, clearing away the supper things, went up to bed.

Now Jack remembered all this as he sipped his tea and read his newspaper. He found himself picking out all the police news about drunkenness, and he couldn't get the subject out of his head.

When breakfast was over, he put down the paper and went up stairs to dress and go out. Perhaps a walk to Highgate would do him good.

"Now for it!" said Mrs. Worrall, as she heard him tramping about the little room overhead. "Oh dear! I do feel so frightened."

She was all of a tremble now, and was obliged to bring out a little bottle from her pocket and have a wee sip to steady her nerves.

"Polly!"

It was her husband calling down the stairs.

"Yes, dear."

"What have you done with my clothes? I can't find 'em anywhere."

What could she say?—her heart was in her mouth, and the bottle was there too, just to give her voice to speak with.

"Jack!"

"Yes."

"Come down here; I want to tell you something."

Jack came down with a worried look on his face. What did it all mean?

The woman went up to him and fawned about him like a dog who has done wrong and expects to be punished fawns about its master.

She took his hand, and said in a trembling voice, “Jack, I was drunk last night !”

“Well, I know that, worse luck.”

“Jack, dear, it was trouble made me have too much. I was in great trouble last night.”

Jack Worrall’s honest face grew graver and graver.

“Polly, my lass, if a woman’s in trouble she should go to her husband, not to the public-house. Come, tell me all about it.”

“Jack, I’ve been spending the money you gave me stupidly, and when I wanted new things I had them of the tallyman, and I got in debt, and last week if I hadn’t paid a pound they’d have come to you, and I—I pawned your clothes, Jack, for the money, intending to get them out before Sunday.”

“What !”

“Indeed, Jack, dear, I did mean to. Mrs. Brown, next door, promised to lend me a pound faithfully, and then she couldn’t, and I couldn’t get your clothes out, and I was so worried I had the drink.”

Jack Worrall felt something swelling in his throat. Had it come to this ? His Polly, his good, honest Polly, owing money to tallymen, deceiving her husband, borrowing of her neighbours, pawning her husband’s clothes, and drinking to drown her trouble ? The tears trickled down his face. Why, this is how those dreadful cases began that he read about in the Sunday newspapers, the ruined homes, the suicides, the murders. Oh, it was too horrible. What had he done to deserve this ?

Polly was touched by her husband's tears, and she began to sob too.

"Oh, Jack, say you forgive me! I wouldn't have done it if I'd ha' known you'd grieve so."

Jack jumped up and dashed his tears away with his fist.

"Look here, Polly. I don't care for the clothes—curse the clothes!—it's you I'm thinkin' about. You've taken the first step on the road to ruin, and it's along o' that cursed drink! There, don't howl like that. Come and kiss me. I'll forgive you this time. But I must keep a sharp eye on you for the future."

"What do you mean, Jack?"

"I mean this, my lass—that you've betrayed the trust I put in you, and that I must watch you *as I would my deadliest enemy.*"

Jack sat at home all that Sunday in his working clothes, and felt very miserable. Two of his mates called for him, and he was ashamed to see them. He sent Polly to the door to say he couldn't come, and they went off without him.

It was a fine bright day, and he longed to be out in the pure air, but he couldn't go in his working clothes; he knew what his acquaintances would think directly. They would chaff, and ask him what he'd put his Sunday "togs" up the spout for. Jack had always been a violent denouncer of the unthrifty habits of his class, and he couldn't have all his old weapons turned against himself.

So he sat at home miserable and wretched. He was in the way while the dinner was being got ready, and that made Polly nervous, and she had a quiet turn or two at that bottle, and somehow she got all in a muddle, and the meat was burnt and Jack couldn't eat. Then she cried, and he scolded, and all the afternoon neither of them spoke a

word ; and at tea-time Polly tilted the kettle and scalded her arm so badly she had to go out to the chemist's and get some stuff to put on it, and the pain was so great that going along, and seeing the public-houses opening, she had to go in and get a little brandy, she felt so faint and queer ; and while she was there she had her bottle filled.

When she got home Jack was asleep on the sofa, and so she went up stairs and lay down on the bed and dropped off too.

Jack woke presently, all in the pitch dark, and groped about to find a light.

“Polly !”

No answer. Polly had finished the bottle, and was dead asleep.

“Polly ! Why, where the devil can she be ?”

A Sunday at home in his working clothes had played sad havoc with Jack's temper.

“Polly !” he shouted again, with a voice to waken the Seven Sleepers ; and still no answer.

“She must have gone into one of the neighbours',” he muttered. “I wonder where the paraffin is.

Groping about in cupboards and corners, Jack at last succeeded in getting the lamp and the paraffin and the matches together.

He was very disagreeable and out of temper, and when after all his trouble the matches wouldn't strike he felt inclined to swear.

“Some of those blessed things that only ignite on the box, I suppose,” he said, after he'd tried the wall, the sole of his boot, the nutmeg-grater, and the mantelshelf.

The matches he had found loose without the box, and he couldn't get a light at the fire because the fire had gone out.

He wasn't going to sit there in the dark till his wife chose to walk herself back. He paced up and down the room, working himself up into a rage. The miserable Sunday had done its work. He thrust his hands into his jacket pocket viciously—his working jacket—and there he came upon his old clay pipe and a box of vesuvians.

Then it struck Jack he might get a light with the vesuvian, by putting it to the wick. He turned back to the table and struck a "flamer," and the lamp and the paraffin can were there. He turned up the wick and was touching it with the light, when the head of the flamer fell off on to the cloth, and set it alight. Jack dashed his hand down in a hurry to put it out, and knocked over the paraffin can. The paraffin was alight in a moment. A stream of liquid fire poured over the table on to the floor. Jack rushed about trying to stamp it out, and all in vain. The wood began to crackle, the drapery caught, the flames rose higher and higher, the place was filled with smoke.

"Fire!" cried Jack at the top of his voice. "Fire!" And then the black smoke drove him out of the room into the street.

The neighbours came out at his cry. By this time the fire had spread, and the sparks were flying. The black smoke puffed out, and through the windows the red glow of the fire shone.

"Anybody inside?" asked a policeman.

"No," said Jack. "The missus is out, thank God!"

Jack Worrall was wild and excited. He wanted to get in again and save some of his household gods, but they wouldn't let him. Better lose all he had in the world than his life, the neighbours told him, and held him back.

The fire spread rapidly. The crowd gathered, the next-

door neighbours began to get their goods together in the street, the first engine came upon the scene, and then all was shouting and yelling and confusion.

Jack Worrall, pushed back by the crowd, stood an agonised spectator of the scene. Here was a pretty end to his Sunday. He wondered why his missus hadn't come out. If she was at a neighbour's she'd be sure to hear the news, he thought. She couldn't be in the house. He went hot and cold as the idea occurred to him. But no—that was impossible. He'd shouted up stairs twice and received no answer when he was trying to get a light.

Suddenly a wild cry went up from the crowd, and then a breathless silence fell upon it.

Right through the smoke and flame they could make out the white face of a woman. She was at the bed-room window, her eyes starting from their sockets with horror, her arms waving wildly, and her lips babbling incoherent words.

She shrieked for help, she tore her hair, she foamed at the mouth, the hot breath of the fiery death fell upon her face, there was no escape, the lower portion of of the house was in flames, and the staircase was impassable.

“Jump!” shouted a fireman, “jump!”

The neighbours brought a blanket and held it to catch her, but the woman would not leap. Terror glued her to the spot.

“If she stays there another minute she's a dead woman,” said the fireman. “She'll be suffocated and fall back into the flames.”

“Where's the escape?”

“We've sent for it, but it'll be five minutes before it's here, and it'll be too late.”

"Good God! Why, there's two of 'em. There's a man as well."

Yes, there were two of them in the fiery furnace now.

Jack Worrall had dashed into the burning building and battled through the smoke and the flame to where his wife stood shrieking and panic-stricken.

He seized her in his stalwart arms. She shrieked and struggled and tore at his face in her mad terror, but he conquered her. Lifting her by main force, he raised her from her feet and swung her to a level with the window.

The firemen had a blanket and a mattress ready.

Jack Worrall gave one glance below, and then with a superhuman effort forced the body of the woman through the window, and loosing his hold let it drop.

Down it came swiftly. The crowd held its breath, then gave a mighty cheer.

The woman was safely caught, and they were dashing water in her face, for she had swooned.

But the man? What of him? Was he not going to jump? Yes. He had climbed out of the window; he was hanging on by his hands to the ledge, and his feet were swinging in the air.

At that moment there was a shriek.

The men holding the blanket leapt back, for it was a mass of brickwork that had fallen with a crash into the street.

At that instant Jack Worrall let go, and fell with a dull thud among the *debris* on the pavement.

* * * * *

Three years have elapsed since Jack Worrall was burnt out of house and home.

It was Sunday morning in Lumpton's lodging-house in the Borough.

Lumpton's lodging-house was a very respectable one of its kind, and the proprietor prided himself on its reputation. There was no working against the police there. Joey Lumpton always told his customers fair and square that he was straight, and he didn't want anybody there that wasn't. Of course, if thieves and swindlers came with their four-pences, they got a bed, but Joey didn't try to make them very comfortable.

Most of the flash folks and the artful dodgers found the moral atmosphere of Lumpton's too bracing for their delicate constitutions, and so gradually they gave it the go-by, and the company became select—as select, that is, as you can expect in a fourpenny lodging-house.

Imagine the disgust, therefore, of Mr. Lumpton when, just as the nobility and gentry of Blank-street, Borough, were going to church, shrieks and oaths and yells and the sound of blows issued from the kitchen or common room in his establishment.

"It's that one-legged man and his drunken wife, drat 'em!" said Mr. Lumpton, rushing down stairs to the kitchen. "I'll turn 'em out. I won't have 'em here."

Louder grew the shrieks, and fiercer the oaths. It was evident the one-legged gentleman and his good lady were, to borrow a figure from the vigorous vernacular, "going it hammer and tongs."

"Jack, dear Jack, mercy!"

It was a woman's voice.

There was a crushing blow, and then all was still.

Mr. Lumpton rushed into the kitchen.

It was the common kitchen, but the one-legged man and his wife had it to themselves. The other lodgers had breakfasted and gone out.

"Now then, what's this?" said Mr. Lumpton. "Hullo! this is a police job."

The woman lay where her husband had knocked her. He was brandishing his crutch and still livid with rage.

"This is a serious job, guv'nor," said Mr. Lumpton, looking at the woman. "I shall send for a policeman."

"Send for one, and be hanged to you! I want to be locked up. If I've killed her and they swing me, it'll be a happy release for both of us."

The one-legged man had not killed his wife, but he had seriously injured her, and he was marched off to the station. When she was able to give evidence he was brought before the magistrate, but she tried to beg him off.

"It was her fault. Oh, she'd been a wicked wife to him. She'd taken to drink and ruined him. He lost his leg saving her life at a fire. He broke it falling into the street, and it had to be cut off. And he'd only earned very little since then. And all their beautiful home was burned, and they lost every penny they had in the world."

But there was other evidence—Mr. Lumpton's, the doctor's, the lodgers who'd heard the man threaten her—quite enough evidence to commit Jack Worrall for trial.

At the trial he was convicted, but not before witnesses had told the story of his long martyrdom, and how his wife had gradually brought him to the brink of starvation.

The last quarrel was a singular one.

Some three years ago the woman had pawned his Sunday clothes, the fire swept away all he had, and he couldn't raise the money to get his suit out again. He struggled and struggled, and kept the wolf from the door, but they had to live from hand to mouth and had no home.

Still, he managed for two years to scrape the money

together to pay the interest on the ticket, which the wife had in her pocket at the time of the fire, and so saved.

The third year came round, and again, with a vigorous effort, Jack had saved the money for the ticket.

Saturday was the last day, and he heard of a chance job at the docks. He went to look for it, and gave his wife the money to pay the interest. He told her it must be paid or he should lose his suit. He always treasured the idea that some day he would be able to get it out again. She had taken the money—the money he had saved by starving himself—and spent it in drink, and he found out on Sunday morning that all his money was wasted, and the last relic of his prosperous days, his suit of black, was lost for ever.

And then in his rage he raised his crutch and felled her to the ground.

* * * * *

Jack had a light sentence, for the provocation he had received was taken into account, and those who had known him in his prosperity came forward and gave him a good character.

While he was away from her in prison a great change came over Polly. She realised now the extent of her wickedness. She read her shameful story in the papers, and it was headed “A Bad Wife.”

From the day when she saw his pale face disappear as he went down stairs from the court-house she vowed, God helping her, he should find a different woman when he came out.

She signed the pledge, and placed herself in the hands of a charitable apostle of temperance, who interested himself on her behalf.

With his assistance, and the help of her husband's old

friends, whose sympathies were aroused by his misfortune, she gradually got a little home about her.

Not a word was said to Jack by those who visited him, only he was told that his wife was reforming, and he was deeply thankful.

The day came at last when Jack was free again.

She met him at the gates, neat and tidy, and as in the dear old days, and brought him home.

Yes, *home!* To two dear little rooms, cosily furnished. And when he had got over that astonishment there was a letter from his old employer offering him the office of time-keeper. A man doesn't want two legs to be a timekeeper, and of course Jack could accept it.

But when the first Sunday morning came round Jack had the greatest surprise of all.

When he opened his eyes and got out of bed, there, on the chair, was a new suit of black, which he found Polly had bought by putting by the money that beer would have cost her every day.

And when he stooped down and kissed her, she whispered in his ear, "Jack, dear, I don't mean to pawn these." And Jack laughed, and said, "No, Polly. If you did, and it cost me the other leg, a whole suit would be of no use to me."

You may be sure he'd got over the loss of his leg if he could joke about it, so we may take it that he was happy and comfortable again at last.

So all ends happily, which is a matter for congratulation. It is not often that stories which begin in the shadow of the Three Brass Balls ever get out into the bright sunshine again.

PLEDGE V.

A GOLD LOCKET.

DEAD!

There was the name in the fatal list. What was it to her that he died nobly, sword in hand, shouting with his last breath to cheer his men? What was it to her that ere the savage foe closed in upon the devoted band he with his good right hand had almost piled a wall of slain in front of him?

The people read of his brave deed, and his name was on every tongue. The pulses of strong men beat the quicker, and their faces flushed when they read what his British pluck had done. Claud Brettingham's name was on every lip, and the country rang with the story of his fate.

She heard it with the rest of the world. The news of a battle and a great defeat came first, and then a list of the missing and killed, with further details and the full narrative of Claud Brettingham's heroism.

She read the account and she flushed with no pride. There was no charm for her in the story of his prowess. Her cheeks went ashen white, she uttered a sharp cry of agony, and then gazed into vacancy with a look of blank despair.

She was his wife. The man who had died, whose body lay buried under the long grass, was her husband, her noble, handsome Claud.

And to think they had parted miserably, to think that

he lay cold and still for evermore, and would never know how truly she had loved him !

The history of their marriage had been a strange one. Eleanor Mayne and Claud Brettingham had known each other from children. The estate of the Maynes joined that of the Brettinghams, and the families lived on terms of the greatest intimacy.

In due course a match was talked of between Claud and Eleanor, and by-and-by it became quite an understood thing that the young folks would fall in love and get married.

They did marry in due time, but they never fell in love.

Claud went into the Army, and Eleanor became a London belle. They met quite as much during the season as they used to in the country, and presently an announcement appeared in the society journals that a marriage had been arranged between Captain Brettingham, of the —th Foot, and Miss Eleanor Mayne, the young beauty and heiress.

“Arranged” was a most suitable word under the circumstances. Eleanor was quite willing to oblige her parents, but Claud tried very hard to upset the “arrangement.” He found that his mother had set her heart upon the match; he supposed he would have to marry some day. The girl he would have married had he dared had disappeared in some mysterious way, and he didn’t care now much who had him. So Claud Brettingham talked the matter over, and at last had worked himself into such a spirit of submissive martyrdom that he went to the altar on the appointed day with much the same feelings that must have animated the staunch old Protestants who took their burnings at Smithfield in such capital part.

It wasn’t a particularly happy marriage. Claud, having

sacrificed himself, was inclined to wear his halo of martyrdom a little too conspicuously, and Eleanor, who really didn't think it was such a terrible ordeal to be married to her, felt piqued and spiteful. She had discovered that with a very little effort she could love her husband passionately, and this added fuel to the fire. If he was careless and distant, she was cold and haughty. If he took no interest in her pursuits, she ignored his altogether.

Once they had a vulgar quarrel, just like common people have, and Claud told her he had never loved her ; that the only woman he had ever loved wasn't an heiress or a beauty.

"Some vulgar girl," thought Mrs. Brettingham. "I'm sure it's a pity he didn't marry her."

Thinking about this vulgar girl—she was quite sure she was vulgar : red cheeks, golden hair, and no h's to speak of—she became curious about her.

Claud was going out of town for three or four days. Mrs. Brettingham gave him a parting shot.

If you should meet this young—person, that you talk of sometimes, you'll let her know you're married now, of course?"

Claud smiled. It wasn't an amiable smile at all.

"I shall not meet her. She disappeared long before I married you."

"How romantic ! Well, I suppose you didn't murder her."

Claud bit his lip, bowed to his wife, and went out of the house. When he got into the hansom that stood at the door he kicked his hatbox. His wife's remark had annoyed him very much.

"Poor Daisy !" he muttered ; "if I'd had the pluck to be a man and behave properly to you, I should be a deuced sight happier than I am now, I dare say."

Captain Brettingham did not find matters improved on his return home. Eleanor was deeply wounded, for she was really in love with her husband. To hide her secret she emphasised her expressions of indifference till they became those of repugnance, and war breaking out at a time when matters were at their worst, the Captain exchanged into a regiment going on active service, bade his wife farewell, apologised to her for any lack of courtesy he might have shown, hoped to find her in good health on his return, and went over the seas to South Africa.

Eleanor held up her face to his in the hall as he stood ready to start, and he kissed her. It was on her tongue then to cry out how she loved him. How, if he would only be gentler with her and a little kind, she would love him as never woman had loved him yet. But his kiss was cold, and the warm words were frozen on her lips.

She let him go—let him go with her heart yearning towards him; she let him go believing he was cold and cruel. And now he was dead. O how she had hoped that he would return to her, and then she might tell him all and win his love. She had pictured the meeting, the little story that she would sob out upon his breast, and then the bright happy days in store for them when all was mutual confidence and love.

The light was crushed out of her life for ever now. Henceforth she had to bear a double load of sorrow. She grieved that he had died far away from her in a savage land, and she grieved that he had died knowing not what a wealth of love her heart had stored for him.

The days and the weeks went by, and time's hand softened the blow, but the bitter memory of the past haunted the young widow in her lonely house. She wanted

employment, occupation, something to divert her attention from the one gloomy thought. At last she decided that a charitable life would suit her best. Claud Brettingham's wife ere her mourning was two months old joined a Protestant sisterhood whose special mission it is to nurse the sick. The order involves no resignation of the world, no vows, and no conspicuous garb. But the very nature of its duties hinders the frivolous and the insincere from joining it.

So the beautiful Mrs. Brettingham disappeared from the scene, and Sister Eleanor became famous as a gentle nurser of the suffering poor.

* * * * *

In the side streets of Soho there are many grimy old houses—houses that have known better days. They are dirty and old and ugly now, and they stand and frown at you, and seem to say, “Why can't we tumble down and die? Why are we brought to shame in our old age, we who were once run after by the rich and the great?” There are broad staircases in many of these houses, and large rooms, rooms where in the days of powder and patch beauty and gallantry danced many a minuet—rooms where beau and belle flirted and gossiped, where fans were waved and snuffboxes tapped while scandal passed from lip to lip, where they gambled and drank and made merry in those bad, wicked old times which the parrots of our era call the “good old days.”

At the door of one of the dingiest and dirtiest of these houses a lady in deep black stands waiting admission.

She has knocked loudly at the door, but no one has answered her. Presently a gentleman in a slouch hat and a seedy velvet coat comes across the road, picking his way through the mud gingerly, for he is in his slippers.

Arrived safely on the kerb, slippers and all, the gentleman wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, gives a loving glance at the word "absinthe" in the window of the public-house he has just quitted, and steps politely past the waiting lady, pushes the door open, then bows and waits for her to enter.

"Madame is coming in?"

"Oh, thank you. Can you tell me if this is where Madame Obert lives?"

"Top floor, madame."

The lady bows and passes on. The gentleman in the slippers looks after her and mutters to himself that she is *belle femme*. What wants she with the little Obert?

It is a strange house, this grimy den in Soho. It is a chapel of ease to the Tower of Babel. Up and down the dirty broad staircases from night to morning go weary feet that have trodden many a foreign land ere they drifted to the mother of cities. The gentleman of the slippers is a Communist exile, devoted to his country and absinthe. He employs his leisure in writing political pamphlets which are never published, and his working hours in painting panels for the cabinet-makers. On the second floor live a German waiter and his wife, above them an Italian family who are mysteriously connected with the manufacture of barometers. There are also in the house a Pole, who is a Prince, and lives on a long white beard and his title, and an old French lady, who keeps cats and a diary, and is some day going to publish a secret history of Napoleon III. which will set the Seine on fire.

And up at the top, where the stairs are narrowest, and where the dirt-encrusted skylight sheds the faintest, yellowest gleam of day, lives Madame Obert, the young

English widow of the French gentleman who died abroad. Madame Obert does not live alone ; she has her little boy with her. He is three, with the flaxen hair and the blue eyes of the Saxon and as bonny an English face as any of those that made the clerical gentleman of Early English history perpetrate a bad Latin pun.

Claud Obert was not with his mother now. The kind Italian woman had taken him to be with her children, and he found endless delight in the quicksilver that Carlo Manzoni, the old lady's son, put in the little barometers. Claud knew that his poor mamma was ill, and that he must not shout or stamp his little feet about in the passages, so he sat and watched the big brown Carlo working and stroking his fierce moustaches, and was quiet and good.

The lady in black reached the top floor, and weary and out of breath knocked at the half-opened door.

A faint voice bade her come in.

She entered and looked around the room.

It was a small, low room, but clean and neat as weak hands could keep it. It was a little untidy now, for the weak hands could do no work. Madame Obert lay on the little bed, her poor face white as the pillow beneath her head.

The lady went across the room with a soft step, and sat down by the sufferer's side.

“Have you been ill long, my poor child?” she asked.

The dull eyes looked eagerly in the face of the questioner. The voice was so kind and gentle it sent a thrill of pleasure to the listener's heart at once.

“Oh yes, madam, I have been ill for many months, and now I am so weak I can no longer move.”

“You must not call me madam, my poor child. I am

Sister Eleanor. I am come to be with you, and nurse you till you are strong again."

"Oh, how good. How did you know I was ill? Who sent you to me?"

"The people in this house know of our society. They came to us and told us that you were poor and friendless and sick. The poor and friendless and sick are our patients."

"And you will stay with me and talk to me? Oh, how shall I thank you?"

"By lying still, talking little, and getting well. That is our reward: to see our patients well again."

"Ah, madam—pardon me. Ah, Sister, God is very good to put it into the hearts of ladies like you to devote yourselves to poor creatures like us."

Sister Eleanor hushed her patient and then tidied up the little room. With quick, skilful hands she rapidly reduced everything to order, and then she came again and sat by the patient's bedside. Presently the doctor came, the doctor of the society; he examined the patient, wrote a prescription, and gave the Sister her instructions.

"Take care of her," he said; "keep her quiet, and we'll have her well in a month. She's been fretting about something."

In the evening a porter brought the Sister a camp bedstead and all her things, and there she was installed as nurse to Madame Obert, who had nothing to do but be still and get well.

About seven came a knock at the door. It was Signora Manzoni with Claud. He had come to say good night to his mamma. The child came in on tiptoe, led by the good Italian dame, then he ran softly to his mamma and she put her weak arms round him and kissed him passionately.

Then Sister Eleanor held out her arms to him.

“ Will you not kiss poor mamma’s nurse ? ” she said.

The boy turned his handsome face and toddled towards her.

She lifted him on her knee.

“ And what’s your name, darling ? ” she said, stroking his flaxen ringlets.

“ Peese my name’s Tlaud Obert.”

Claud ! For a moment Sister Eleanor forgot herself. A spasm of pain passed across her face, and she put her hand to her heart. Then with a sudden movement she clasped the child to her breast, and her tears trickled down upon his little face, upturned in astonishment.

The emotion was over in a minute. She put the child gently down, and motioned the signora to take him from the room.

She explained to the wondering patient, who had been a silent spectator of the scene, that someone who had been very dear to her had been named Claud, and it had revived old memories.

The days passed on, and under Sister Eleanor’s careful nursing Madame Obert grew rapidly better.

The two women were great friends from the first. The Sister took great interest in her delicate, refined patient, and little by little she learned her story. She confided one night to her that the name she bore was false ; that there was a mystery about her life. She told her sympathising listener how she had loved not wisely but too well ; how the man she adored had promised to marry her when certain family scruples had been overcome ; and how, trusting him blindly, looking upon him as one who could not lie, she had lived with him as his wife. And then one cruel day,

some months before his child was born, she had seen in the papers that he was engaged to marry a rich and beautiful lady, and then she had taken her things and gone away without a word, vowing he should never see her nor hear of her again. Since then she had earned her living by giving cheap lessons in music, and teaching English to the foreigners in Soho who could afford sixpence for a lesson now and then. That is how she came to be living in the quarter.

Eleanor heard her story, but it was told a little at a time and with many interruptions, and she was not quite sure what all of it was about, for when Madame Obert was talking her thoughts were often far away.

One day when the patient could sit up she asked for a little box to be given her from the drawers. She opened it and drew out the little odds and ends. Sister Eleanor noticed among them a pawn-ticket. She was too familiar with the homes of the poor and needy not to know one by sight in a minute.

Madame Obert noticed the look of her nurse.

“Ah,” she said with a sigh; “it was a bitter day when I had to part with this.” She held the ticket up, and Sister Eleanor saw that it was for a gold locket, and that it had been pawned for two pounds.

“It was last winter it went, when I was very poor and there was no money here at all, and no one to take lessons. I was ill, too, and couldn’t go out. The signora down stairs took it for me and got the money, for I sorely needed it. But it was his last present, and I was weak and worried at the time, and confused, and in my confusion I forgot, when it was too late, that his portrait was in it. And now,” she added with a sigh, “I fear I shall never see it

again. I am so poor, and now that I cannot work I shall have all the back rent to make up. O my poor lost love!"

The weakness of her long illness was still upon her, and she broke down and sobbed.

Sister Eleanor bent down and soothed her. "Come, come," she said, "don't cry like that. You are not poor, and you won't have any rent to pay yet. Come, cheer up. You are on the books of our society, you know, and we shall see you through."

The poor creature looked up and smiled through her tears.

"And more than that, if you give me the ticket I'll send and take the locket out for you now—there!"

Madame Obert could hardly believe her ears.

"O, Sister!" she cried—"No, no! it would be imposing on your goodness."

"Nonsense, child! Some day I will tell you *my* story. I am rich, and have nothing to do with my money, only to benefit my fellow-creatures."

The Sister took the ticket from the yielding fingers of its owner, then went down stairs and gave three sovereigns to the young Giuseppe Manzoni, promising him a shilling for himself if he brought the locket and the right change.

Giuseppe rushed off without waiting to put on his hat, and presently came up to the room where the Sister sat with her patient.

Sister Eleanor took the locket and handed it to Madame Obert. Little Claud was seated on the foot of his mother's bed nursing the signora's kitten.

Madame Obert took the locket with tender reverence and kissed it.

"O, Sister," she said, "you do not know how glad you have made me."

She held the locket up with her thumb upon the spring.

"Now you shall see the man I loved—the man who deceived me and married a rich lady—the father of my little Claud."

She pressed the spring and the locket flew open, and Sister Eleanor saw the handsome face of her dead husband, Claud Brettingham.

* * * * *

There is a charming little cottage at Richmond, near the river, where the passers-by often stop in the summer weather to admire the climbing roses and the sweet honeysuckle, the old-fashioned marigolds, and all the flowery wealth of an English garden glowing in the sun. And sometimes they see a little lad with flaxen hair and blue eyes trip down the path with merry shouts, chasing a butterfly from bloom to bloom. Then a delicate-looking lady with a sweet face—a face all the sweeter for the tinge of sadness that o'ershadows it—will look lovingly from the window and call anxiously to him not to run and get hot in the sun ; and sometimes the little lad waits at the open gate, and, shading his eyes with his hands, looks eagerly up the road.

Presently he espies a tall, handsome lady in deep black. Then he claps his little hands, and crying, "Aunt Eleanor—Aunt Eleanor!" runs towards her and leaps into her arms to be smothered with kisses.

Sister Eleanor she is still to all but Claud. He is specially privileged to call her aunt. She has taken a strange fancy to her late patient. She has bought this little cottage as an investment for her money, she says. Madame Obert must oblige her by living in it to take care of it, as she cannot

leave London and her nursing. Madame Obert must also be handsomely paid for her custodianship, and must keep a servant, and so Madame Obert finds life very different from what it was in the old days at the grimy Soho lodging-house.

Claud Obert will be rich some day, though he does not know it, for Sister Eleanor has left all her money between him and the society of which she is a Sister.

She knows now the story of her husband's lost love, and her woman's heart has room still to pity the faithful girl whose pride waited for no explanation, but bade her leave his side at once.

Knowing all now, and looking back upon the past with feelings chastened by time and sorrow, she can find no nobler way of honouring the dear memory of her lost lord than by saving the woman he deserted and cherishing the child he never knew.

She is a constant visitor to the villa at Richmond, and there is one thing she never fails to do—that is, to open the gold locket that hangs from Madame Obert's neck and gaze at the portrait within.

She says she does it to see if Claud is growing like his father.

PLEDGE VI.

A DRESS SUIT.

“SIMPLE SIMON’S at it agin,” growled Mrs. Bulgruddery; “he’s a-stompin’ up and down and a-howlin’ and a-roarin’ like mad. Pat, go up and tell him to howd his row.”

Pat, like a dutiful husband, did as he was bidden. He went up the crazy stairs of the house in Leather-lane where he lodged, and yelled out, “Be quiet, will ye? We can’t get a wink o’ sleep.”

It was just ten in the morning, and although Leather-lane houses are not expected to be particularly quiet at any time, yet this one was an exception. It was rather a superior house. There were in it a working man and his wife, and a family of french polishers, the proprietor of a happy family and a gentleman in the bill-sticking line, three or four young men who went to “business” on the average quite twice a week, and Mr. and Mrs. Pat Bulgruddery, a highly-respectable Irish couple, who were the proprietors of a very flourishing early coffee-stall.

At ten nearly everyone was out except Mr. and Mrs. Bulgruddery, who came home about eight from their nightly labours and retired to rest to recruit.

But of late Simple Simon, the gentleman who occupied a little room just above their heads, had also taken to remain indoors in the daytime—not, alas! to sleep, but to be very wide awake.

On this especial morning he was so dreadfully noisy,

pacing up and down, shrieking and shouting, that Mrs. B. could stand it no longer, but dispatched her better half with the polite message which Pat duly delivered.

“Howd yer row, will yer? How’s onyboddy to sleep wid yer blessed Saturdaynailer a-goin’ on like this?”

Pat was fond of long words. He picked them up from his customers. Old University men with no boots to mention, ripe scholars with a penny to last them four-and-twenty hours, starving and blighted geniuses, broken-down spendthrifts, victims of misfortune and merciless disaster—all the flotsam and jetsam of the mighty city—these were among the customers who sought the warmth of the little fire and a cup of the scalding hot liquor in the long and lonely watches of the night at Pat Bulgruddery’s coffee-stall.

Pat’s classical expression had no effect on the person it was hurled at.

“What, yer won’t—won’t yer? Now, I say, Simon, look here, ye know; my old ‘oman’s dead beat, and she ain’t had a wink. I appeals to you as one gent to another —stow it!”

As he finished this appeal Pat Bulgruddery stepped into the apartment of his fellow-lodger, and then started back in astonishment.

The room was bare of furniture, save a straw pallet, a broken chair, and an old deal box, which served as a table. In the centre stood the long cadaverous figure of Simple Simon, the jest and butt of half the street boys of London. He was about fifty-five years of age, six feet high, and piteously thin. He had won the sobriquet of Simple Simon from his habit of talking to himself and suddenly bursting out with addresses to imaginary people. He had also

certain other eccentricities of demeanour which were considered to justify the title.

His calling was peculiar and objectionable. He dressed rabbit-skins for the furriers, and slander whispered that some of his rabbits were cats. But on this occasion he had not been dressing either rabbits or cats, but himself, and that was the reason of Mr. Bulgruddery's astonishment.

There in the centre of the room stood Simple Simon, not in the old filthy garb that he ordinarily wore, but washed and clean, and in full evening dress. Mr. Bulgruddery was not in the habit of taking in the *Gazette of Fashion*, nor was he so well versed in the varying cuts of a dress coat as Messrs. Poole or Cutler, but he knew quite enough to see that the dress suit of Simple Simon was twenty years old if it was a day. The shirt, too, with its elegant ruffles, was yellow with age.

The transformation was so complete that for a moment Pat thought he must be mistaken in the man. He gave a peculiar whistle, and remained transfixed to the spot.

Simple Simon, taking no notice of the intruder, continued his performance.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, holding a broken teacup in his hand, “this is the twentieth anniversary of my wedding day. For the cordial manner in which you have proposed the health of myself and my dear wife, I thank you; our children thank you. You behold our happy home. Ha, ha! Our happy home. She is a noble woman, ladies and gentlemen, is my dear wife, and I am proud of her. God bless you all!”

The imaginary guests addressed evidently here stood up and waved their pocket-handkerchiefs, for Simon leapt on

the top of the box and hoorayed lustily, as though he were leading the party

He thrust his hand into the pocket of his coat and drew out a handkerchief.

It was a woman's handkerchief, a delicate little toy, edged with the finest lace, and marked in raised silk letters in the corner, "Marian."

Simon pulled the handkerchief from his pocket and was about to wave it, when his eyes fell upon it, and he saw what it was.

He looked at it for a moment silently, then pressed it passionately to his lips and burst into tears.

Mr. Pat Bulgruddery, astonished at the whole scene, and quite at a loss to know what to make of it, beat a rapid retreat, and informed the partner of his joys that that there Simple Simon was gone stark staring mad in a suit of swell togs.

* * * * *

Simple Simon made no further noise.

Since he found the handkerchief he had not paced the room or made any more speeches.

Presently he roused himself from his reverie.

"It is time," he muttered; "it is time for me to be going."

Simon took up his poor old hat, brushed it round, and made it look as respectable as he could, and then sallied forth into the street.

The appearance of Simple Simon in evening dress in the street was the signal for the most intense excitement in the colony.

At first the people hardly knew him, but gradually the eccentric dresser of rabbit-skins betrayed himself to the puzzled on-lookers.

The men and women shrieked with laughter, and the boys pelted him.

“Hullo, Simple Simon! goin’ to have yer fortergraft took?” “Goin’ to see your gal, Simon?” “Has the Queen arksed yer to go to Buckinem Pallis to brekfus?”

Simon took no notice of the local wits, but hurried along, his strange costume everywhere attracting attention. Now and then a stone narrowly missed his hat, and an occasional handful of mud hardly improved the appearance of his coat.

But all things have an end, and so had Simon’s persecution. After he had cleared the locality in which he was known he was allowed to go unmolested.

It struck eleven as he made his way across Oxford-street, and in a few minutes he was standing with a crowd outside St. George’s, Hanover-square.

There was a wedding party expected shortly, and the British sightseer had assembled in force.

Simon edged his way as near to the red baize pathway as he could, and waited with the rest.

The people noticed him and chaffed him. It was suggested that he was the bridegroom trying to hide, or that he was one of the guests, who’d hired his clothes at the old curiosity shop.

But presently the bridal party arrived, and then Simon was forgotten. The guests drove up and passed into the church. The bride’s mother was a beautiful lady, everybody said. Everybody knew she was the bride’s mother from the family laundress, Mrs. Jones, who stood among the crowd and explained everything aloud to the female friend who accompanied her.

“Ah, poor thing! she’s had a lot o’ trouble, she has,”

said the laundress, as the stately lady passed up the steps.
"Had a bad husband."

"Is he here?" said the friend.

"Here! Lor' bless you, no; he ain't been heard of for nearly twenty years. Drunk hisself to death, they suppose, years ago."

"Lor'! And is that his daughter that's being married?"

"Yes. She was a baby when he went away. He used to get mad drunk, and the poor lady went in terror of her life. She was a baronet's daughter, and her friends were very rich, and they were always opposed to the marriage, for he was only a poor gentleman when she took up with him, and her friends made her get a separation—leastways so the story goes."

"And quite right too," said Mrs. Jones's friend.

"Yes; only she fretted after him when it was all done, for when he wasn't on one of his mad drinkin' bouts he was very kind to her, and she was fond of him, there's no doubt; but after the separation she never heard nothing of him, and it's supposed he went abroad and drunk hisself to death."

Simple Simon stood quite close to the laundress, and heard her story, which was only interrupted by the arrival of the bride and the bridesmaids.

She was a beautiful creature, the bride, and she won the admiration of the crowd at once.

Simple Simon looked after her eagerly as she entered the church from which she was presently to emerge a wife. Then he waited patiently with the crowd till the bridal party should return.

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The service was over and the doors were flung wide open. The bride and bridegroom entered their carriage and were

driven off; then the relations and friends poured out, and there was quite a large crowd on the pavement, and much shouting for carriages and general confusion.

As the bride's mother was about to enter her brougham the horse began to rear. The lady had one foot on the step, when the beast gave an angry plunge, and was about to dart forward.

“Take care, ma'am,” cried the footman, and at that moment a strange figure sprang to the horse's head and seized it.

The terrified animal, alarmed at the apparition, plunged fearfully, and, dashing forward, struck the man down, and amid the cries of the bystanders the wheels went over him.

The bride's mother, who had taken her seat, gave a cry of horror. The horse had been stopped, and was still enough now, but there in the roadway lay the poor fellow who had thought to do her a service. He was covered with mud, and bleeding.

Recovering herself a little, the lady bade her footman remain behind and see how the poor fellow was, and then ordered the coachman to drive on, for the wedding party would be waiting the hostess.

The policeman picked up the fallen man.

“Does anyone know who he is?” asked the footman.

At that moment Pat Bulgruddery pushed his way through the crowd.

“Yes, I do,” he said; “he's Simple Simon, and he lives in Leather-lane.”

The footman obtained all he wanted of Pat, who had followed his strange fellow-lodger that morning out of curiosity, and then returned to his mistress with the information that the man she had run over was an eccentric

dresser of rabbit-skins who lived in Leather-lane, and was called Simple Simon.

Simple Simon, who had never opened his eyes or spoken a word, was put into a cab and taken to the hospital.

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A week later a lady called at the hospital to inquire for the man who had been run over outside St. George's, Hanover-square.

They told her that his ribs had been fractured, but that he was going on as well as could be expected.

She would like so much to see him, to tell him how sorry she was. He was trying to do her a service when it happened. "Might she see him?"

Simple Simon's face was turned away as the lady entered the room. The nurse came up to his bedside and told him that a lady had come to see him.

The man knew who it was, and still kept his face turned away. The lady sat down in a chair by the bedside.

"My poor fellow," she said, in a soft, gentle voice that thrilled through him like music, "I am so very sorry for this accident. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Still with his face obstinately turned away, the patient answered her in a whisper.

"There are other patients in the ward," he said. "Don't cry out if I tell you a secret."

A secret! What did the man mean? Ah, of course, the poor fellow was not right in his head.

"Tell me your secret, my good man."

She expected to hear that he was the rightful King of England, or something of the sort.

Simple Simon slowly turned his head on the pillow till the light fell full upon his upturned face.

Then with trembling lips he uttered the one word, "Marian."

In spite of a supreme effort, a little cry burst from the woman's lips. Her face went ashen white, and she gasped for breath.

Husband and wife had met at last. It was the bride's father who had been crushed under the carriage-wheels of his wife on his daughter's wedding day.

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On every visiting day the grand lady came to the hospital and sat for a certain time by Simple Simon's bed. Little by little his story came out. When her friends had forced the separation on, and offered him an allowance, his pride had rebelled, and he had determined they should never hear of him again.

He confessed his faults ; he knew that when the terrible drinking fits were on him he was a maniac, but none the less her quiet acquiescence in his sentence had cut him to the quick.

"Richard, what could I do ? It was best for both our sakes—best for the child's sake."

"Aye, it was best for you and her, but not for me. You severed the last tie that bound me to respectability. After the separation deeds were signed I plunged into the wildest dissipation. I brought myself to the brink of the grave, but I determined you should never again be disgraced by any act of mine. I changed my name. When all my money was gone, I herded with the poor and wretched, and toiled for my daily bread and drink at a filthy trade."

"Poor Richard ! I thought you were dead."

"Yes, poor Richard indeed. I sank to the very lowest depths of poverty and despair. I had little food ; all I

earned I spent in drink—drink seemed to drown the sense of shame and degradation. Drunk, I made an idiot of myself, and became a byword in the neighbourhood, a wretched drivelling fool for women to mock and boys to pelt and stone.”

The woman buried her face in her hands as though to shut out the sight.

“Down in the den where I live they call me Simple Simon. When I am sober I work at my trade—I dress rabbit-skins for the furriers; when I am drunk I roll about the streets in tatters, smothered with the filth that the boys hurl at me. I’m Simple Simon of Leather-lane!”

“O, Richard, this must never be again,” wailed the agonised woman. “I am rich; you have a right to the money, though you have never claimed it.”

“Money, Marian! Do you think I would touch your money? Not I. Your grand people flung it in my face once that I married you for your gold. I think I’ve lived that lie down.”

“But, Richard, when you are well and can leave this place you will never go back to that—that horrible life?”

“God knows. I have fallen too low ever to rise again.”

Suddenly the lady appeared to remember something.

“Tell me,” she said; “you weren’t dressed in rags such as you describe on the day of my—of *our* daughter’s wedding?”

“No. You didn’t see how I was dressed then. You only saw something in the road covered with mud. Marian, I was dressed then exactly as I was dressed on the first anniversary of our wedding day—the night that I got mad drunk and frightened you—the last night we were ever husband and wife.”

“Richard!”

“That’s been one of my crazes. I pawned that suit with everything else after the blow came. I pawned everything for drink. I let everything go but this, and this I have taken out every year and worn on the anniversary of our wedding day. That’s one of my mad notions, you know. Our daughter was married on the anniversary of our wedding day—that’s how I came to wear it then.”

“And if you are so poor, how do you get the money to redeem it, Richard?”

A smile passed over the man’s face.

“I starve for it for weeks, Marian. I pawn everything else I have in the world to get it out. I wouldn’t let the anniversary of our wedding day pass without wearing it if I had to steal the money. I put it back the next day, and take my other things out. It’s a rum notion, isn’t it? I think I should like to be buried in that suit, Marian. Ha, ha!”

“Richard, this terrible comedy shall be played no longer. I will rescue you in spite of yourself. Things might be so different if you would only make the effort!”

She rose to go. He took her hand.

“Marian, one word. I have told you the history of my life since our separation, but to all the world beside it is a secret. Remember that! To you I am alive; to our daughter I am dead. Promise!”

“Yes, for the present I promise, Richard. But there are brighter days in store, I hope, when no one need blush to own kinship with you.”

The man shook his head.

“Never.”

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The weeks went by, and Simple Simon got better, and able to move about the hospital grounds. One day the lady called as usual and was informed that he had gone away of his own accord, saying he was quite well and didn't want to stay any longer.

He had left no message, no trace of his whereabouts. His wife made every effort to find him, but all was in vain. He had been back to Leather-lane for his few belongings, and disappeared.

One night in the winter, after the public-houses were closed and most of the revellers had passed away, Mr. and Mrs. Bulgruddery sat at their stall. The wind whistled round the corner, and the snow blew in the faces of the few benighted wayfarers with blinding force. The hot coffee steamed temptingly, but trade was slack. No one who could help it would stay in the streets such a night as this.

Pat had snugged down in a corner of the stall out of the wind, and Mrs. B., pulling her shawl tightly round her, had shut her eyes for forty winks, when they were aroused by the banging of a cup in the saucer.

“Hullo!” said Pat. “Cup o’ corfee, sir?”

Then he started back. There in front of him, in rags and tatters, the snow thick on his unkempt beard, and his face blue with the cold, stood Simon.

“Why, blest if it ain’t Simple Simon!” said Pat.

“Dear heart alive!” exclaimed Mrs. B.; “give him a cup o’ corfee, Pat.”

“I didn’t come for that,” said Simple Simon, “but I did want you to do me a favour.” He fumbled with his numbed fingers and drew a letter from his breast.

“I want you to take this to-morrow to the address on it—it’s the address of the lady that ran over me.”

" All right," said Pat. " I'll take it, mate, never fear."

" Thank you. Good night—I'm going home."

Pat looked after him. " Poor Simon," he said; " ain't he a wreck! Wonder where his home is now!"

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" Marian, the time has come when I can ask you to do me a favour, because it will be the last. I've drunk away every farthing I have in the world. I'm homeless and penniless; I shall die to-night. You will hear of me at the mortuary of —— parish. Enclosed is the ticket of my favourite suit. I want to be buried in it. Good-bye; God bless you !

RICHARD."

So ran the letter Pat Bulgruddery delivered to the rich lady.

Simple Simon's last wish was obeyed, and he sleeps the last sleep in the suit that he prized for auld lang syne. He had no pauper's funeral, for in Nunhead Cemetery a marble stone records his name and the date of his death.

Marian kept her unhappy husband's secret faithfully, and to this day his daughter never knew that the pauper who committed suicide one winter's night, and was found dead in his rags and tatters, was her father, Simple Simon, the rabbit-skin dresser.

PLEDGE VII.

A WEDDING RING.

“No luck again to-day, Polly.”

Dave Heathcote took off his coat, and flung it on the dilapidated sofa of a shabby little front parlour in Lambeth, and then dropped into a rickety armchair with a deep sigh.

Polly, like a dutiful little wife, came to comfort him.

“Don’t be downhearted, Dave, dear; remember when things are at the worst they will mend.”

“Mend be ——”

Polly put up her little hand, and clapped it on Dave’s mouth just in time.

“Now, don’t be a cross old dear; bear up and be a man. Look at me.”

Dave did look at her with his eyes very wide open, for Polly had darted to the middle of the room, and was dancing a breakdown which would have sent a sixpenny gallery wild with delight.

“Very nice, my dear,” said Dave with a sarcastic inflection turned on full, “but you’re performing to a bad house; there’s no money in it.”

Polly, out of breath, with a merry twinkle in her eyes, gasped out, “Oh, indeed, isn’t there?”

“Well, all I know,” said her husband, “there wasn’t any when I went out.”

“Ah, but *I’ve* been out too.”

Dave jumped up and caught his wife’s arm:—

"By Jove, Polly, you don't mean to say you've got an engagement?"

"Yes, I do," answered Polly triumphantly.

"For both of us?"

"Yes, for both of us."

Two minutes afterwards Mrs. Turvey, the landlady, opened the door and delivered a short speech. Was it decent for the parlours to be dancing Irish jigs and yelling like mad, disturbing the other lodgers?

Mrs. Turvey wasn't a bad sort, and Polly soon pacified her when she told her that the Irish jig was entirely due to the joy which she and her husband felt at having obtained an engagement at last, and the knowledge that they would soon be in a position to pay Mrs. Turvey all arrears.

When the landlady had descended to her kitchen, Polly told Dave all about it; how she had seen an advertisement in the *Era* in which a whole company was required, how she had gone to the address given and seen a nice gentleman, who had told her how he was going to make a grand provincial tour, to commence at once, and he had further told her that she and her husband were just the people he wanted.

"And the terms, Polly?" asked Dave, anxiously.

"First class! We're to have five pounds a week each, and all our travelling expenses."

No wonder Polly was overjoyed and danced breakdowns. Why this was wonderful luck. She and Dave had been out of an engagement for months, and things had begun to look very desperate.

They had a short London engagement at a theatre which opened gloriously. Such decorations, such luxuries—it was to be the talk of London. Unfortunately, all the specula-

tor's capital had been spent in these luxuries, and after the first week, business being bad, only half salaries were forthcoming ; the second week the house was in Chancery, and the third it was shut.

Dave and his wife had given up a safe provincial engagement to get a show in London, and it was a great disappointment to them. They couldn't go back to their old company, for their places were filled up. Dave had tried all the agencies, little and big, and paid as many fees as he could afford, but without success.

They had no capital, and after the first month the shoe began to pinch. There was the rent to pay, and they had to live, and there was no money coming in. With terror Dave found that their wardrobe would have to go, and farewell to provincial engagements if you haven't got a decent wardrobe.

It was just when the clouds were blackest, and absolute misery was staring them in the face, that Polly—God bless her heart!—went out and did in one morning what Dave had been trying to do for three months.

Dave and Polly were “useful” folks. They could play Hamlet and Ophelia, and Romeo and Juliet, if Shakespeare was wanted, or they could make themselves generally useful in burlesque and opera bouffe. They had been members of provincial travelling and stock companies all their lives, and the members of such companies have to do a little of everything, and do it decently.

Dave was about thirty-five, and Polly was two years younger. They were both born and bred to the stage, they fell in love on the stage, and it seemed quite unnatural to both of them that they could not be married on the stage as a sort of benefit performance.

Polly confessed to Dave that when he put the ring on and said, "I take thee," &c., she quite expected the pit and gallery to applaud, and he confessed to her that he'd studied the service just like he would a part.

But there was nothing theatrical about their affection ; it was honest and tender and true, and Polly, with the war-paint off, was a sweet, loving little woman that would have been a blessing to any man's home.

She was a blessing to Dave, and they sailed along life's river merrily enough till this London engagement upset everything, and for the first time since their marriage they were face to face with trouble.

But this was all over now, for the morning after Polly's visit to the manager Dave went and saw him and signed the engagement, and in a week they were to open at the Theatre Royal, Swamperton.

Now that they had got an engagement, Dave summoned up the courage to do what he had not dared to do before. He parted with such portion of their wardrobe as was not likely to be wanted until he had money to redeem it, and this, with a little pinching, got them free of Mrs. Turvey and left them their railway fare to Swamperton and a little over. Salaries and expenses only commenced from the first performance.

It was all outlay at first, but what did that matter ? Fancy when the ten golden sovereigns came in weekly, how nice and comfortable they would be !

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The first night at Swamperton was a great success. The house was crammed ; the company in high spirits. The manager was such a gentleman ; he had a big diamond ring on his finger, and he seemed so careless in the matter

of expense that it was quite evident money was no object to him.

He went to the best hotel in the town and lived like a prince. After the first performance he invited the gentlemen of the company to supper, and gave them champagne. Dave came home to the lodgings he had taken for the month they were to play in Swamperton and told Polly that he was a real swell, the manager was, and no humbug. He was going to make his company the talk of the provinces.

Polly clapped her hands, and whispered to Dave that now they would have a real chance of showing the big towns what they could do. "And the next time we go to London, Dave," she added, "we shall go with a big reputation, and anybody will be glad to have us."

Dave thought so too, but he didn't say much on the subject, for the champagne had been very plentiful and he was beginning to feel sleepy.

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The succeeding nights at Swamperton were not so good as the first. The house was only half full, and there were whispers that a good deal of paper was about. The manager, however, laughed when any of the company spoke of the bad business. He expected it; he was prepared for it. He had taken a fair amount of hard cash, and if the first week or two was a loss it didn't matter. He had plenty of capital behind him.

He spoke so cheerily that the company were quite cheerful too, and when Saturday morning came round and it was treasury, they all appeared at the theatre jubilant.

Many of them were like Dave and Polly, they had been

out of engagements for some time, and treasury was a delightful novelty to them.

The manager met them all bows and smiles. He was really very sorry he had forgotten to inform them before, but treasury would be on Monday this time. It would be much more convenient to him, as he intended to have a gentleman specially to attend to the finances. He was coming on Monday, and if they did not mind he would prefer to leave it till he came.

There was a little grumbling. It was rather inconvenient to some of the company, but the manager spoke so nicely, and explained to them his reasons so lucidly, that they gradually dispersed, not quite so happy, perhaps, as when they came, but still consoled with the idea that Monday was close at hand.

Saturday was always the best night of the week at Swamperton, and this Saturday was no exception. The cheap parts of the house were crammed, and the audience was enthusiastic. Polly got a big call, and Dave was delighted. The manager shook hands with her that night, and congratulated her, and Dave declared he could hear her heart bumping with pride all the way home.

Sunday was a quiet, happy day. Secure in the knowledge that they were to have plenty of money on the morrow, Dave and Polly strolled into the country and had a little dinner at an inn. Then they strolled back, and found beauty in everything. The sky seemed bluer than they had ever known it before, and the birds sang just as if they knew to-morrow was treasury, and they were going to have ten golden pounds too. They sang so loudly and joyously that Polly thought it couldn't be wicked, or they

wouldn't do it, and so she sang too, as they strolled along the green lanes.

O, that happy Sunday afternoon ! Dave Heathcote will never forget it—never, as long as he lives.

They got home to their lodgings and had a nice quiet little tea, and Polly cooked two mushrooms she had picked by the way, and ate them all herself ; and Dave was an old goose and got sentimental in the twilight, and then he and Polly went and stood at the window and watched the sun fading from the sky and the darkness coming slowly over all.

“ How like some people's lives the twilight is, Polly,” said Dave, thoughtfully. “ The sun goes out, the darkness comes on, and —— ”

“ And you're a dear old silly, and please don't give me the horrors. O, Dave, it's treasury to-morrow—let's have the candles.”

Polly pulled her husband's face down and gave him two big kisses, and then the candles were lit.

* * * * *

In the middle of the night Dave woke suddenly. Was it fancy, or did he hear someone calling him ?

“ Dave ! ”

He started up. It was the voice of his wife that lay by his side, but oh, so faint and low.

“ Dave, I feel so ill.”

Dave was frightened. His wife lay and moaned with pain, and he wondered what he had better do.

“ Dave, dear, I think you'd better go for a doctor, I'm in such dreadful pain.”

“ My poor darling, whatever can it be ? ”

Dave was up quickly enough when he knew what to do, and he had his clothes on in no time. He had lit the

candle, and was alarmed at the expression of his wife's face. The illness was so sudden and mysterious he could not account for it. Bidding her be of good heart and he would be back with the doctor directly, he ran down the stairs and out into the street.

It was three in the morning. Dave's road to the doctor's lay past the railway-station. There is a train from the North which reaches Swamperton soon after three, and the Swampertonians who have marketing business in London travel by it. As Dave passed the station the train was just due. There was a handful of people about, and Dave was surprised to see among them his manager, with a portmanteau in his hand.

Where could he be going? He went close up to him and said, "Good morning."

The manager started as if he had been shot, but he recovered himself in a minute.

"Hullo, Heathcote! what brings you out this time of night?"

Dave told him.

"Sorry for you," said the manager. "I shall be back in time for treasury. I return by the ten train with the new secretary."

Dave gave a sigh of relief. He saw it all now. The manager was coming back with the new secretary.

He bade him good morning, and hurried on to the doctor's. The doctor returned with him and saw Mrs. Heathcote. He shook his head, and his face was very grave. Then he asked her what she had been eating, and Dave told him about the mushrooms.

"Ah," said the doctor, "that accounts for it." And then he told poor Dave that the mushroom she had eaten was

probably the deadly *Agaricus phalloides*, so often mistaken for it, and that his wife was poisoned, and that her illness was serious.

* * * * *

Dave went to treasury on Monday alone. He took with him the doctor's certificate to show the manager. Polly was weak and ill, and the doctor said it would be weeks before she would be strong enough to play. Dave was very down-hearted. It seemed such a pity just as they were on the high road to fortune.

When he got to the theatre the company had assembled. It was the first treasury, and they wanted the money badly. In many cases there were dear ones far away at home anxiously awaiting the promised remittance. There was a very pretty girl who played the ingenues, and she was terribly anxious for her little pittance. She had a poor old widowed mother in London, whose very daily bread depended on her scant earnings. She knew that unless she sent money to-day the poor invalid might have to go dinnerless to-morrow.

As the appointed hour struck, and no manager and no secretary appeared, the poor players began to look terribly anxious, and their faces grew longer and longer.

They talked the matter over, and Dave related the incident of the early morning. Then a great fear fell upon them all. God help them if their suspicions were true, and they had indeed fallen into the trap of a swindling manager.

Alas! their fears were realised. Gradually the terrible truth came out. The man had paid nobody; not even his hotel bill had been settled. He had taken the whole of the receipts for the week and bolted.

He was one of the class who live upon the poor struggling

players, who entice them far from their homes to country places, and then leave them penniless and wretched in a strange town to settle their bills and get back again as best they may.

Dave Heathcote hardly knew how he got back to his lodgings. What was he to do in a strange place, without money, and with a sick wife?

When he got home he found Polly worse. The doctor had been again, and left a message with the landlady. The patient must have delicacies, and be kept up, as the shock to the system had been great.

Delicacies! Where were they to be got? Dave was almost beside himself. Why, he hadn't the money to pay the week's rent that was due. How could he keep the terrible secret? Polly guessed it in his white face; she gathered it from the incoherent words which fell from his lips. Over the heartrending agony of that dark hour I draw the veil.

* * * * *

The news of the fiasco at the theatre travelled fast. Some of the poor people were turned out of their lodgings at once. There was no chance of their paying, and they had to go, to make room for those who could.

Dave's landlady wanted him to turn out there and then, but he refused. To take his wife out ill as she was would kill her. Besides, where were they to go? To the work-house?

That afternoon the local pawnbroker did a roaring trade with the company. Everything that could be spared went to pay the rents and enable the poor victims to get back to their homes.

Dave's scanty wardrobe, and his wife's as well, went at

once, and the landlady, mollified by a small payment, gave Mrs. Heathcote another week to get well.

But the trouble and the illness together had made recovery a difficult matter. At the end of the week Polly was worse, and Dave was in despair.

The doctor came in one afternoon and ordered her brandy at once—she was sinking. Brandy! Poor Dave, where was he to get it? Brandy might save her life yet, the doctor told him. “A little and often”—those were his words. What could he do? He hadn’t a shilling in the place. There was nothing to pawn. His wife lay in a fitful slumber, her white, thin hand outside the coverlet. Her fingers had grown so thin her wedding ring was loose.

The gleam of the gold caught Dave’s eye as he sat by her bedside, and a sudden thought flashed upon him.

Furtively, as though he had been a thief, he stretched out his hand and gently drew the golden circlet from her finger. The perspiration stood on his forehead, and his hands trembled.

At last he had it off and in his possession, and still she slept.

He crept softly out of the room and went over the road to the pawnbroker’s. It was a good thick ring—he remembered the happy night they had chosen it from the jeweller’s stock—and they lent him seven and sixpence on it.

Then he bought a bottle of brandy and went back to his lodgings.

Polly still slept. She was breathing so softly and gently, and her pale cheeks had a hectic flush on them. The doctor said sleep would do her good. He would give her the brandy when she woke.

The landlady came and knocked gently at the door. There were some gentlemen down stairs who wished to see Mr. Heathcote. Dave went down stairs.

He had carried the ticket for the ring in his hand with the brandy. He hardly knew what he was doing, for trouble and want and long vigils had unnerved him. He left the brandy and the ticket together on the little table by the bedside, and went down stairs in a half-dazed condition, wondering who could want to see him.

They were some gentlemen of the town, who wished to organise a benefit for the players who still remained in Swamperton unable to get home.

They wished Dave to put them in possession of all the facts he knew.

The conversation lasted half an hour in the landlady's parlour, and the gentlemen left Dave happier than he had been for some time. Their scheme was good, and they promised him assistance at once. Dave was very grateful, and he went up stairs with a swelling heart. Hope was his at last.

He entered the room with a light step and went to the patient's side. Something in her look alarmed him. The eyes were close shut, the hectic flush had gone, and the face was of a leaden hue.

He ran to the top of the stairs and called for the landlady.

They lifted poor Polly up and put brandy to her lips and bathed her brow, but she did not open her eyes.

She was in a dead faint.

Dave bade the landlady stay by her, and rushed off terrified for the doctor.

When they returned Polly lay as still as ever—her breathing was barely perceptible.

"She's fainted," said the doctor; "she's had a sudden shock or undergone some extra exertion."

Dave assured the doctor that she had not.

The doctor put his hand on her heart. Then he turned to Dave and said kindly, "My poor fellow, prepare yourself for the worst."

Dave knelt by the little bed like a man in a dream, and prayed to God to spare his darling's life. God in His great wisdom refused his prayer. In an hour Polly Heathcote was at rest for ever.

Dave took the dead hand in his agony to press it to his lips. It was the ringless left. As he lifted it reverently, he noticed that it was clenched, and that the dead fingers held something in their cold clutch.

Gently he unloosed them, and started back with a cry.

In the poor dead woman's hand lay the pawn-ticket of her wedding ring.

She had woken during Dave's absence, and found it, and the sudden revelation of the last sacrifice to which destitution had reduced them had caused the poor feeble heart to break.

* * * * *

Polly Heathcote lived and died not in story but in fact. Dave Heathcote, her husband, drags out a weary existence still, his heart buried in his young wife's grave. He is one of the stock company of a little theatre in the North, without hope and without ambition. The swindling manager is doing well. I sat next him not a week since in the stalls of a West-end house, and the brilliancy of his diamond ring dazzled me. I see by the advertisements in a theatrical newspaper that he is specially organising a first-class company for a provincial tour. Poor company!

PLEDGE VIII.

A DIAMOND NECKLACE.

“FATHER’S late,” said Mrs. Alabaster, as she glanced uneasily at the Dutch clock; “father’s dreadful late. I hope nothing ain’t happened to him.”

“P’r’aps he’s gone a-slidin’ in the Park,” suggested Master Jemmy Alabaster, aged nine, who was amusing himself by picking small pieces out of the muffins that stood, buttered and ready, in the fender.

“Gone a what?” said Mrs. Alabaster, looking at her son and suddenly discovering his occupation. “Jem, you young varmint, leave off picking them muffins, do! I don’t know where you gets your nasty ways from, I’m sure. Gone a slidin’, indeed! The father of a respectable family, as have come home to his tea at 6.30 regular from the first day he vowed to do so at the altar, as is fifteen years ago, gone slidin’! Jem Alabaster, you’re a fool !”

Jem Alabaster subsided, but still he felt his supposition was quite natural. Hadn’t it been freezing for a week, and weren’t the parks crowded with skaters and sliders? Wouldn’t he just go sliding, only his mother wouldn’t let him!

Mrs. Alabaster got up and felt the muffins and turned them round, then she rearranged the bread-and-butter in the big dish, then she dropped a lump of sugar into the tea-cups, just by way of doing something. Mr. Alabaster’s unpunctuality on this occasion was not only singular—it was

annoying. It was the 13th of December, and his birthday, and on this occasion there were always muffins for tea and a few other little seasonable delicacies, such as a sixpenny cake, &c., and all the children waited and had tea with father.

Jem was the youngest boy, but there were two more children not yet present—Nelly, a bonny girl of fourteen, the eldest, and Tom, who went to work with father and came home with him.

Mr. Alabaster was a working jeweller. He was employed by a large firm in Hatton-garden, and had been with them twenty years. He was a great favourite with his employers, and often sent by them on confidential missions. “James Alabaster might have been trusted with untold gold,” said the Messrs. Briggs, his employers, and they acted up to their belief.

It was nearly seven when Nelly, her pretty cheeks scarlet with the cutting wind, came down from her post of sentry at the front door to announce that nothing was to be seen of father.

Nelly always waited at the front door when she could, and got dad’s first kiss, and helped him off with his comforter and his overcoat.

“I can’t make it out, mother,” continued the little girl, “because if he’d gone anywhere sure-*ly* he’d have sent Tom on to say so, and Tom ain’t come home.”

“O’ course he would,” groaned Mrs. Alabaster, “Lor’, I shall be quite in a fidget directly. There be such awful things in the noosepapers nowadays one don’t know what to think. He may be——”

The good lady was just going to enumerate some of the horrible disasters which may befall people in the London

streets, when there came a knock at the door, and Nelly rushed up stairs.

It wasn't father's knock, but it was Tom's. Perhaps father was with him.

Tom came in as jolly as a sandboy, and smacking his lips at the smell of the muffins, but his face fell when they asked him where his father was.

"Why, ain't he come home?"

"No."

"Well, that's rum. Why, he left half an hour earlier to take a diamond necklace home that we had to repair, and he told me he should be home before me. I stopped half an hour late to let old Briggs out; he stayed a bit late to-night."

Mrs. Alabaster gave a little cry of terror. "O my poor orphans!" she exclaimed; "your poor father's been knocked down and robbed, and perhaps killed, and he'll never come home no more, and the muffins won't be worth eating when he does."

"Oh, nonsense, mother," said Tom, cheerily. "Father will be here all right. He's only been kept waiting at the house. It's a lady of title as the necklace belongs to, and he was to give her the necklace himself, and take her receipt for it."

"Of course, mother," chimed in Nelly; "why these grand ladies will keep you waiting hours."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Alabaster, wiping her eyes with her apron and fetching Jemmy a box on the ears for playing with the teapot lid; "what I says is, ladies or no ladies, a man ought to have his tea while it's hot. What's that?"

That was a knock—father's knock, sure enough.

Nelly and Tom were at the door in a minute, and there was father as right as a trivet, and as jolly as ever.

"Sorry I've kept tea waiting, 'Tilda, dear," he said, cheerily, as he gave his spouse a kiss that might have been heard next door; "fact is, I had a queer little job on to-night."

"I know," answered Mrs. Alabaster, "the diamond necklace. There, sit down and have your tea; the muffins will be as tough as leather. Just as if you couldn't have told the lady it was your birthday and you was expected home to tea."

Mr. Alabaster sat down and had his tea, and his family gathered round the table and had their tea too.

And in the interval of munching muffins and emptying his teacup, he related the adventure which had kept him so late.

The diamond necklace had been sent by Lady D——, an old customer of the firm, to have a slight alteration. Alabaster had instructions to deliver it to the lady in person, and take her receipt for it. The necklace had been hurried on, a servant having called from Lady D.'s a few days since with special instructions for it to be sent on a certain evening, as Lady D—— wanted to wear it at a ball.

When Alabaster arrived at the house and asked for Lady D——, he was told she was not in—would he step in and wait a minute?

He went into a room and sat by a fire, and the footman came in and talked to him. He was a very swell footman, and kept flicking his pocket-handkerchief about in front of Alabaster's face, and waving it to and fro like the swell footmen do in the play, and presently the heat of the fire

drew Mr. Alabaster off, for he felt quite drowsy, and his head nodded, and he must have dropped off and had forty winks.

When he woke up he looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and saw it was past six, and then the footman came in and said her ladyship was detained in the country. They had received a telegram to say she would not be home till the morning.

“Did you leave the diamonds, father?” asked Tom.

“Not me, my boy, I brought ‘em away with me.”

Mrs. Alabaster leapt up in terror. She desired to know if Mr. Alabaster wanted his wife and children murdered in the night. How would he like to find them with their throats cut in the morning? She wouldn’t sleep with them diamonds in the place. It was worse than a barrel of gunpowder.

“Nonsense, my dear, who’s to know I’ve got them here?”

Mr. Alabaster put his hand in his pocket and drew the case out and opened it. There, in its velvet bed, lay the beautiful diamond necklace.

“Put it away!” shrieked Mrs. Alabaster; “how do you know who’s a-lookin’ through the keyhole?”

Mrs. Alabaster’s terror was so genuine that to console her her husband closed the case and put it in his pocket again.

Mr. Alabaster had no peace that evening, and he heartily wished the necklace at the devil. About nine o’clock, when the street grew quiet, his wife had worked herself up into such a state that she absolutely refused to pass the night beneath the same roof as the diamonds.

She was sure the house would be broken into. Thieves

could smell diamonds, she said, like postmen could postage-stamps.

“Well, what the deuce would you have me do?” growled Mr. Alabaster, at last fairly out of temper.

“Why, take them back to the shop.”

“It’s shut long ago, and everything locked up.”

“Well, then, take them to the governor’s private house, and let him keep them all night.”

Directly he heard his wife’s proposition it suddenly dawned upon Alabaster that this was what he ought to have done at first.

“By Jove, old woman, you’re right. Tom, put on your hat, and we’ll take ‘em now.”

Tom, nothing loth, put on his overcoat, and he and his father set off for the North of London, where the governor lived.

Arrived at the house, he sent up his name, and was shown into the dining-room.

“Well, Alabaster, nothing wrong about the necklace, I hope,” said the master, looking anxiously at his visitor.

“No, sir, only Lady D—— was not at home, and not likely to be to-night, and as I had your strict orders to deliver it personally and take her receipt, I brought it away again.”

“Quite right, Alabaster; we can’t be too careful in these days of jewel robberies.”

“Yes, sir; I thought so, sir, and so I took it home, and somehow I didn’t think perhaps my house was quite safe for such a valuable article, and so I brought it to you, sir.”

Alabaster put his hand into his breast pocket and drew out the jewel-case and presented it to his master.

The jeweller took it, opened the case mechanically, and looked at the gems within.

As he did so a strange expression of horror stole across his face, and he went deadly white.

“Good God, Alabaster!” he exclaimed, springing to his feet. “What the devil does this mean?”

Alabaster stared in amazement, and thought his master must have gone suddenly mad.

“What does what mean, sir?” he said, nervously

“Why, hang it, man, this isn’t the necklace I sent you with! These are paste.”

It was Alabaster’s turn to be horrified now.

“Paste, sir! Why, they’ve never been out of my possession since you gave them to me.”

The jeweller was pacing the room in a state of terrible excitement. He turned fiercely on to his workman.

“I tell you these are paste! The diamonds I sent you with were Lady D——’s own, that she left with us to be repaired.”

“But they’ve never——” Alabaster stopped short. He suddenly remembered how he had fallen asleep at Lady D——’s.

He told his master all the circumstances. But that would hardly account for the robbery.

“There’s been a plot here,” said his master. “You must come with me at once to Lady D——’s.”

Alabaster felt like a man in a dream. The whole thing was a perfect mystery to him. He could hardly believe it.

Tom was still waiting in the hall. He was sent home with a message to Mrs. Alabaster that his father had gone out on business with the master, and would be late home.

“And don’t go and frighten her, Tom, or let her know as I look flurried. I’ll tell you all about it to-morrow.”

Tom went home with the message, and Alabaster, with

a beating heart, got into a cab with his master and drove to Lady D——'s.

* * * * *

“Is Lady D—— at home?”
“Yes.”

Alabaster was surprised. It was a different footman from the one who had let him in and told him her ladyship was detained in the country.

He and his master were shown into an ante-room, and after a while Lady D—— came to them.

She was utterly astonished when the jeweller commenced by saying that in consequence of her orders he had sent the necklace home that evening.

“I never sent such an order.”

“Your own maid, madam, called with that message.”

Lady D—— rang the bell.

“Send Parkyns to me.”

“Parkyns is out this evening, ma'am.”

Parkyns, the maid, not being there to answer for herself, Lady D—— requested the jeweller to continue.

He told his story shortly—how he had sent a trustworthy messenger with the real diamonds, how the messenger, after waiting half an hour, had been told that her ladyship would not return to town that night, and how the messenger, having received instructions to hand them to her ladyship personally, had thereupon left the house with them.

“And, your ladyship,” concluded the jeweller, “between the time he left my establishment and returned to my private house the real jewels had been abstracted and these put in their place.”

With these words the jeweller opened the case and showed her ladyship the paste diamonds.

Her ladyship gave a little start, and stammered out: "Why, those are mine."

"What, your ladyship! These are not the diamonds you left to be repaired?"

"No; but—dear me, it's very singular. To tell you the truth, some years ago in Paris I had a necklace made in imitation of my own, and—this is it. It must have been abstracted from my jewel-case."

The jeweller opened his eyes with astonishment. Alabaster sat with his mouth open as well. It was all like an Arabian night's entertainment to him.

"But where are the real jewels? That is the question," said the jeweller, when he had recovered from his surprise. "It is now evident that the change was effected here, and that one of your people is concerned in the matter."

"The footman who opened the door to me was a tall, dark man," Alabaster ventured to observe. "Perhaps he'd know why he said you weren't coming home, your ladyship?"

Lady D—— rang the bell and requested the footman who answered it to send Johnson up.

"Johnson's out this evening, your ladyship."

"That's singular," exclaimed the jeweller. "The maid who left the false message and the footman who deceived my messenger are both out."

Her ladyship looked puzzled. It certainly seemed very strange.

"I think I'd better go to Scotland-yard at once," said the jeweller, "if you've no objection. This is what they call a plant, your ladyship, and the sooner the police know of it the more likely we are to get your necklace back. You

won't see either your maid or your footman again. They're off with the necklace."

* * * * *

The jeweller's anticipations were realised. Neither of the suspected servants returned, and when Lady D—— went to her jewel-case she found that the necklace was not the only thing she had lost.

The police took the matter up at once, but before they had time to make many inquiries a new feature was imparted to the case.

By the following afternoon's post Alabaster's master received a letter. On half a sheet of paper was scribbled in pencil : "This ain't any use to us—you can have it now we've passed the notes"; and enclosed was a pawnbroker's agreement for the advance of £800 on a diamond necklace the property of Lady D——.

The jeweller went off with a detective at once to the pawnbroker, and interviewed him. The transaction was perfectly square and straightforward. This was the pawnbroker's narrative :—

"The other day a footman brought me a note apparently from Lady D——, saying that her ladyship wished for a temporary advance of £800 on a diamond necklace. Would I call on such a day at such an hour and see the necklace and make the advance ?

"Such a request is not at all unusual. Very great people pledge their valuables at times, and I saw nothing peculiar in the affair, especially as I was to go or send to her ladyship's house. No thought of fraud ever entered my head.

"I went about half-past five in the evening and was shown into a room. After waiting some time a lady I

presumed to be Lady D—— came in and brought me the necklace in a case which I noticed was not made for it.

“A footman who took my name when I called informed me that her ladyship was at home, and he addressed the lady I saw as ‘your ladyship.’ I had no reason to suspect that it was a case of personation.

“The jewels were perfectly right. I gave notes for the amount, and took them away with me, and here they are.”

With these words the pawnbroker opened the case, and there sure enough was the diamond necklace.

The plot was now perfectly plain. The jeweller had been ordered by the maid to send the necklace home at an hour when her ladyship would be out, the pawnbroker had called about the same time, and been shown into an adjoining room, and then the change had been effected.

There was no doubt the thieves were well aware that the jewels would only be given up personally to Lady D——, and hence the necessity for the complicated arrangements.

The fact of the necklace being sent to repair doubtless suggested the scheme to obtain possession of it. When it was at home Lady D—— always kept it in a place of safety, to which not even her maid could obtain access.

The police concluded that Alabaster had been stupefied by a chloroformed handkerchief being waved in front of him, and that the whole was an artfully-contrived plot of the footman and maid, who had not been long in her ladyship’s service, and who were doubtless confederates and part of the gang of professional jewel robbers, who live about in service until they have an opportunity of effecting a *coup*.

The necklace was duly redeemed, Lady D—— and the jeweller arranging the loss between them; and Mrs. Alabaster, who heard the whole story, went down on her

bended knees and begged her husband, if he loved her, never to go a-takin' diming necklaces and things 'ome, not for nobody, as might ha' chloroformed him to death, and no knowin' but for that agreement or memyrandum a-turnin' up as it did might have caused him to be thought to be one of the gang himself, which a honester man, though that pig-headed and obstinate at times, didn't exist.

And Mrs. Alabaster is to a certain extent right. But for the thieves sending the agreement, knowing they could neither dispose of it nor redeem the necklace, it is quite possible Alabaster might have gone through the world with a suspicion of having been something worse than a dupe in the matter attached to him.

In this, the age of clever jewel robberies, when the thieves have an organisation which not only includes servants, but detectives, I need not insist too much on the truth of this narrative.

There is a well-known jeweller, not a hundred miles from Hatton-garden, who will be very pleased to endorse every word of it, and if he is engaged, ask for Mr. Alabaster.

But if he should not happen to be in, pray don't go to his private residence and mention the object of your visit to his wife. The mere mention of a diamond necklace sends that worthy lady into hysterics.

PLEDGE IX.

A PAIR OF BLANKETS.

THE great gas star of the Royal Alcazar Music Hall flung its radiance half across the muddy roadway outside, and brought the magnificence of a pair-horse brougham into full relief. It lit up the silver-plated harness of the impatient chestnuts, it beamed upon the shiny hat of the liveried Jehu, and just enabled the passer-by to see that the interior of the equipage was luxury itself.

It was evident that some person of distinction was the proprietor, for an eager crowd had gathered about the carriage waiting for him to make his appearance.

It isn't always a pleasant crowd to look upon that gathers in the Haymarket at 11 p.m., and to-night the flaring transparency and the milk-white gas globes flung a garish light upon gaunt figures, sallow, wicked faces, leering eyes, and cruel lips. There were battered wrecks of humanity there —tottering old sinners broken down by drink and dissipation; and there were youths just entering on manhood, but with faces that told already a miserable tale of early vice.

And there, too, were women—women out of whom the world had long since crushed all semblance of womanhood. There, side by side, stood the stout Belgian outcast in her hired finery, and the thin English wanton in her tawdry rags, and near them the old and shrivelled beldames who are the spies of West-end hagdom; and over all there floated an odour of patchouly and gin.

The rain pours down, but the crowd still waits. Round it gathers a fringe of respectability—countrymen seeing life, gentlemen on their way to the club, and decent men and women passing along to their homes.

“What are they waiting for?” says a young woman, with her marketing basket on her arm, to her husband.

Before he can reply, the answer comes from a youth at her elbow—a youth with his billycock hat on one side, a cigar in his mouth, and a shilling crutch stick in his hand.

“Why, for O’Howler, o’ course. It’s ‘is Ben ter-nite, and that’s ‘is kerridge.”

The youth is right; the ladies and gentlemen are waiting to see the great O’Howler, the lion comique, the gentleman who earns thirty pounds a night by roaring out meaningless trash spiced with innuendo that means a great deal.

It is his benefit to-night at the Royal Alcazar. The walls are plastered with his name in letters of red and green. Inside the place is crammed. He has sung his last song, he has made his speech, and been presented on the stage with a diamond ring by the proprietor—the diamond ring being provided by himself—and now he is drinking champagne at 10s. 6d. a bottle with the “swell” patrons of the establishment. He doesn’t drink much, for he has another “turn” at half-past eleven.

The inside patrons have been duly gratified, and the patient outsiders’ turn is approaching.

The great man comes out jauntily, a huge rose in the button-hole of his light coat, and his diamond shirt-studs flashing in the gaslight.

How they envy him, some of these poor wretches in the street! how they wonder what he does with his thirty pounds a night! One pale-faced lad pushes his way to the

front and shouts out, "Brayvo, Bill!" Bill is the O'Howler's Christian name.

The O'Howler strides through the crowd to his carriage with the calm disdain of an emperor accustomed to homage. He turns the silver handle of the door, and is about to fling himself gracefully into the gorgeous interior, when a violent hand is laid upon the tail of his elegant overcoat.

The great O'Howler turns with an oath to see who has thus dared to assail him, and the crowd gives a shout of astonishment.

This proud creature of genius, in faultless array, with his rose and his diamonds and his lavender kids, is held firmly in the clasp of a wretched, gin-sodden hag, whose rags are encrusted with mud, and over whose bloated face the drenched hair escaped from a battered bonnet hangs in a wet, untidy mass, so that her features are scarcely discernible.

The singer, disgusted and savage, gives her a violent push, but fails to get free.

She clings to his coat-tail, jabbering and shouting.

"Leave go, you drunken fool, or I'll give you into custody!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" yells the hag. "Give me into custody, will you? Look here, my fine gentleman, don't you know me?"

She staggers back, and with a violent effort flings the hair back from her face.

The women in the crowd jeer, the boys laugh, and the respectable fringe gives a little cry of horror and loathing.

It is an awful face. It is the face of a woman not old yet, and with the remnants still of what were once good looks. But the cheeks are puffed and blotched with drink, a blow

has blackened one eye and laid open a portion of the cheek, and dirt encrusts the whole.

The little cry of horror in the crowd is music in her ears. She points to her hideous face, and stammers out with many a drunken hiccup—

“Look at me!—ain’t I a beauty? But I’m as good as him. He’s a mighty fine gentleman, with his carriage and his diamonds, ain’t he? Ask him who I am, curse him?”

She runs at the lion comique again, and seizes him, crumpling and marking his beautiful shirt-front with her filthy paws.

“Look in my face, Bill O’Howler, and deny it if you can—ain’t I your lawful wife—ain’t I Mrs. O’Howler?”

The great man is deathly pale now, his lips tremble, and he seems to gasp for breath. Collecting himself with an effort, he seizes the woman by the wrists, and, flinging her from him violently, leaps into his carriage and drives off amid the yells of the mob.

* * * * *

The great O’Howler had done his last “turn,” and had nearly broken down. The *habitués* of the chairman’s table wondered what was up with “O’H.”

He did not stay to satisfy inquirers. He got away directly he had finished his songs, and drove home instead of going, as he usually did, to his club.

He was undoubtedly agitated and nervous, and he had reason to be so. The hag who had assaulted him was his lawful wife, the mother of his little girl, and for many years the faithful sharer of his joys and sorrows. In the years long ago, when he was only a linendrapers’ assistant, toiling for a paltry wage from eight in the morning till nine and ten at night, this woman had been his faithful, loving wife.

It had been a hard struggle then for bread, but they had been very happy. Nelly had worked herself to the bone to keep their little home comfortable and the baby tidy, and he had always found comfort and rest at his humble little hearth.

He was a good fellow then—that is he could sing a good song and tell a good story, and among the married fellows in the shop who had homes he was a great favourite, and asked to their houses to supper now and then, and he always gave them a song.

It was often said to him jocularly in those days that he ought to get an engagement at a music-hall, and he began by-and-by to think seriously of it.

The shoe pinched at home, for the wife fell ill, and his paltry wages were quite inadequate to the requirements of a medical attendant.

Pushed in a corner, the idea occurred to him to try and get an engagement at a free-and-easy or public-house concert, and he succeeded by this means in adding a trifle a week to his income.

From that hour he advanced rapidly, and soon got an engagement at a regular music-hall, where he became a favourite, and gradually rose to the front rank of stardom.

But with his first success came his first great trouble.

His wife, who in the days of adversity had been a blessing to him, now that he was prosperous grew to be a curse.

During her long illness she had been ordered to drink port wine. Gradually she grew to crave for it, and soon spirits took the place of wine.

She felt she wanted it “to keep her up.” The old, old story was told again. The craving grew and grew till it developed into a disease.

The husband, away continually from home, scarcely guessed how bad matters were at first, and some slight desire to hide it from him acted as a small check upon the woman's downward course.

But he found it all out presently, and then the last barrier was broken.

Wider and wider grew the breach, till at last it was open enmity—disgust on his part, hatred on hers. She followed him to the halls then, drank at the bars, and annoyed him. Then came domestic brawls at home, quarrels, curses, and blows. Lower and lower she fell into the abyss of drunkenness, till at last he left her, broke up the home, took his daughter away with him, and made the wife a separate allowance.

She spent it all in drink, threatened him, begged of him, and made his life a misery. At last he promised her a large sum to leave the country. She accepted it, and he thought at last he was free.

He was a great star now, worshipped by the music-hall *habitués*, wealthy and happy in the new home he had made, where his daughter reigned like a little queen.

At home with Nelly, his little girl, the great O'Howler was a different man. The yelling lion comique had disappeared, and there sat the happy, quiet father devoted to his child, and sharing heartily in her innocent pleasures.

It was a relief to him after the coarse glitter and heartless mockery of the music-halls to sit at home and talk with his child, to wander with her on the sunny days through the fields and lanes, and listen to her innocent prattle.

He dreamed no splendid dream for her ; he would rather see her dead than on a public stage. Some day she might love someone better than him, he thought, with a sigh, but

he dismissed the idea, and pictured himself a grey-haired old gentleman living in some quiet place far from the babel roar, with Nelly for his little housekeeper and companion.

It was for her he worked ; it was her sweet face that loomed upon him in fancy through the smoke and fumes of the music-halls, and reconciled him to the coarse familiarity of the cads and the insolent patronage of the swells.

He was a lion comique with a strident voice and a flash style, but underneath the magnificent shirt-front and the diamond studs there was an honest, loving heart filled now with one image—that of his child.

It was for Nelly's sake more than his own that he was terrified to know his wife was back again, pursuing him.

Soon after she went away he had broken it gently to the child that her mamma was dead, and Nelly had mourned awhile, as children mourn, and then forgotten.

He thought of the jeers that would greet him from his companions if it were known this drunken hag was the wife of the great star whom they all hated because he was so successful. And the public? What would they think if they knew that while he was riding in his brougham his wife was wandering the streets a drunken outcast.

And she was Nelly's mother, too. Oh, it was too horrible !

Yes ; for the child's sake he would make one more effort to save his wife. It was not only the disgrace to him, it was his child's name that also would be linked with the mother's shame.

He searched, but he found her not. He advertised under initials that a sum of money awaited her at the solicitors', but she evidently never saw the paper.

For a time his life was a terror to him. Every night as he sang his eye wandered nervously among the audience :

every time he passed from the hall to his carriage he trembled lest he should be confronted by the drunken, ragged outcast who bore his name.

But the months passed on and he heard no more of her, and the fear wore off. And the summer mellowed into autumn, and autumn shivered into winter, and Christmas was round again, and the great O'Howler was king of the pantomime at a house across the water.

* * * * *

The pantomime season is approaching its termination at the Theatre Royal —, and the O'Howler's little daughter has not seen it.

She wanted to see papa—funny papa—so badly, and to-night he has brought her, and she sits alone in a private box.

The great comique has told his brother and sister artists that his daughter is present to-night, for he is very proud of her, and the funny men and the beautiful ladies as they dance and sing and play the fool all give a glance at the stage box where Nelly sits entranced.

“What a beautiful little girl, O'H.,” says the second low comedian, who is playing an ogre. “When are you going to bring her out?”

“Never,” is the emphatic answer.

“By-the-by, O'H.,” says the man presently, still looking towards the box, “I didn't know you were married.”

“Didn't you?”

“No; I've never heard of a Mrs. O'H.”

“She's dead,” answers the great comique, and then he turns sharply away and gets to the wing for his next entrance.

When the opening of the pantomime was over Nelly was

fetched round to papa's dressing-room, and when he was ready they both went out at the stage-door.

There was a crowd round it listening to someone who was talking, and every now and then there was a roar of laughter

O'Howler clutched his child's hand and would have walked rapidly past, for he did not wish her to hear the language of the streets ; but suddenly he heard his own name, and stood rooted to the spot.

"Here is O'Howler, missus," said a scene-shifter in the crowd. "Now you'd better run away."

"Me!" shrieked a voice that made the singer's blood run cold. "Me run away! Not me! Where is he, the wretch?"

The crowd of supers and ballet-girls drew on one side, and there, the centre of the jeering group, stood a drunken and loathsome woman.

"The drunken old idiot says she's your wife, sir," said the scene-shifter, touching his hat. "Shall I call a policeman?"

The hag shrieked with laughter.

"Yes ; send for a policeman. Yah! He can't deny it. Ain't I your lawful wife, Bill O'Howler?"

Suddenly she caught sight of the little girl, and rushed towards her with her arms extended.

Nelly shrieked as the terrible woman came near her, but before anyone could interfere the hag had flung her arms about the child's neck and had clasped her to her ragged breast.

"My child," she whined ; "my child that they robbed me of! Ain't I your own dear mother, Nelly, eh?"

The child, poisoned with the fiery breath of the dram-

drinker, and crushed close to her frowsy rags, gave a cry of horror ; but as the woman spoke she looked earnestly into the bloated, disfigured face, and knew it again.

“ Oh, mother, mother ! ” she wailed. “ Poor mother ! We thought you were dead.”

O’Howler dashed forward, and would have dragged Nelly away from the filthy embraces of the drunkard, but the crowd, astonished at the dramatic *denouement* of a street comedy, had closed round the mother and child, and were listening eagerly to the startling revelation.

Suddenly the crowd stood aside as if by magic, and the star saw his wife in the grasp of a policeman.

“ Now then, missus, come along,” said the man.

Then he added, turning to a woman who accompanied him, “ Sure this is her ? ”

“ Sure enough, the thief ! That’s her as come and had lodgings at my house, and stole the things and pawned ’em for drink, the wretch ! ”

Mrs. O’Howler started up and let go poor Nelly, who, seeing her mother in the clutch of a policeman, now clung instinctively to her.

Mrs. O’Howler was fumbling in her pocket, when the policeman caught her hand and forced it open.

In it was a pawn-ticket for a pair of blankets.

“ Ah, you was goin’ to throw that away, was you ? Here, come along,” said the officer, and taking her by the arm he forced the woman towards the station.

The people followed.

The landlady held forth to them on her wrongs. She’d housed and fed this woman and never got her rent, and had to put up with her drunken, beastly ways, and she must go and strip the place and pawn the things for drink.

"And them there blankets," she added, "she have took unbeknown to me this werry day off my own bed."

As her mother was dragged away amid the jeers of the crowd, Nelly, sobbing, clung to her father, who had been a silent spectator of the scene.

He had been glued to the spot; he had been powerless to speak. The event, so sudden and so horrible, had overwhelmed him. But as his daughter took his hand and the crowd passed away he bowed his head and moaned:—

"Oh, the shame—the bitter shame!"

And even his coachman, who had seen and heard all, pitied the lion comique, as, humiliated and heartbroken, he stepped into his gorgeous equipage and said, in a voice choked with emotion, "Home!"

* * * * *

"Ellen O'Howler, a wretched-looking creature, who said she was the wife of the well-known comic singer of that name, was convicted of illegally pawning a pair of blankets, the property of Mrs. Esther Johnson, and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment."

That was the short paragraph which ran the round of the papers and awoke some curious comment. Half the people, however, who noted it at all believed the woman was a drunkard, and that the statement was quite untrue.

But to O'Howler it brought unutterable agony.

He had not been called at the trial, and those of the profession who had heard the stage-door story had carefully avoided referring in any way to it in his presence.

Many of them had too many skeletons of their own not to feel sympathy when a neighbour's popped unexpectedly out of its cupboard.

It was at home with his daughter that O'Howler felt it

most. The child was at an age when all strange events make deep impressions.

The sight of the mother she had thought dead in those terrible rags and with those ghastly features had inexpressibly shocked her, and now when she thought of that mother dragged away to prison amid the jeers of a cruel crowd her sensitive heart was almost broken.

And she knew now that her mother was not only a drunkard, but a thief. The story of the pawned blankets had been yelled aloud by the indignant landlady in her presence.

The comic singer and his daughter sat alone in their beautiful house now, and there was heard no pleasant sound of laughter.

Between them always there rose up the awful figure of the wife and the mother, the drunken outcast and the convicted thief.

Bitter shame rested upon the name they bore, and it could not be changed or concealed.

It stared at them in letters two feet high from the hoardings; it flaunted itself outside the great music-halls in the full blaze of gas stars and flaring jets.

* * * * *

The months have passed away and the days are coming when the wretched woman will be free once more.

O'Howler has vowed, for his own sake and the child's, to get her out of the country ere she brings further shame upon them.

But the world troubles itself little with his awful sorrow, and guesses not the load of agony he carries with him as he strikes his jaunty attitudes upon the stage and yells out the merry songs that the street boys whistle from pole to pole.

They see his name on the hoardings, these street boys; they hear of his princely salary; and sometimes, on a Saturday night, they spend a hard-earned sixpence to get into the gallery and listen to him. They envy him and think of his diamonds and his glory.

But they do not know how, when the lights are out and the plaudits are heard no more, the lion comique would give all his fame and all his wealth to be as lighthearted and hard up and free from trouble as the humble office-boy that envies him his magnificence.

But there is one treasure that he would never part with. It is the knowledge that he possesses it which sustains him in his terrible affliction.

When the grey shadows pass across his face, and he sits and thinks of the old days when he was a toiling linen-draper's assistant, poor and unknown, but happy, a sweet voice breaks upon his reverie, and looking down he sees two eyes upturned to him full of truth and love.

And bending down to kiss the fair young face, he thanks God that the wretched woman who has marred his later life bore him a child in his obscure poverty to lighten the load of his present fame and wealth.

PLEDGE X.

A SURPLICE.

THE Rev. James Dawson, irreverently known as "Jemmy," was a great favourite in Bishop Orton. Bishop Orton, a quiet, sleepy little market town in Essex, had taken to the Rev. James from the day he came down third class from London to enter on his duties as curate with a carpet-bag in one hand and a gun-case in the other. He was of the good old order of parsons, which is fast dying out. He was fond of a drop of port when he could get it. He would puff his long clay at the open window of his lodgings, and he would drop into the Rose and Crown parlour and ask if the landlady would oblige him with the loan of last week's *Bell's Life*.

There was no pride about the Rev. James. He was wofully poor, and he made no effort to conceal it. He had to wear his clothes till they were threadbare, and his shirts till they were frayed, and the tradespeople in Bishop Orton could certify to the fact that he didn't spend his money in the luxuries of the table.

Jones, the butcher, calculated that he had a pound of meat twice a week, and Smith, the baker, swore that a loaf lasted "Jemmy" four days.

His duties were not heavy, for he had no week-day services to conduct, but his stipend was small; £60 a year was the magnificent price allowed to the rev gentleman by an absent vicar, whose income was hundreds.

Now, up in London, bed-ridden, in a little back room, lay a poor old lady, who had seen better days, but who was now dependent on her only son. That son kept her, though he was poor himself. He went without an overcoat and fire in the winter that his old mother might have little comforts, and sometimes he went without food.

No one guessed the reason that the Bishop Orton curate was so awfully shabby on his £60 a year, but twice a year he went up to London to see this old bed-ridden lady in the little back room. He was the good son, and this was the mystery of his scanty meals and shabby clothes.

But he had one vice, one terrible vice, which was also an extravagance. He was fond of shooting, and for the purpose of shooting he kept a gun.

He was out with his gun whenever he got a chance of a day's sport, and often and often he would carry it with him on his visits to the poor, and leave it in the corner while he chatted with the men and women.

If the women folk only were at home he stuck to business. He gave a little good advice where it was wanted, and was duly serious where seriousness was necessary. He had a quiet way of laying down rules and regulations for guidance in life—a plain, homely way that appealed not only to the ears but to the hearts of the people, and three words from the Rev. James Dawson were as good as a sermon from anyone else.

But if the husband was at home and was a sportsman, somehow or other he and “Jemmy” would begin talking about dogs and horses, and the bull pup's points would be discussed with animation, for the parson was reckoned a fine judge of bulls and “tarriers.”

The Rev. “Jemmy's” gun was a source of great terror

to the old ladies. He was quite as ready to pray with an old lady as he was to talk bull pups with her son or her husband ; but though he flung his whole soul into it and was far more earnest than the eye-rollers and whiners, the old ladies were sometimes much more nervous about the state of "Jemmy's" gun than about the state of their own souls.

Women are proverbially nervous of fire-arms, and the sight of the Rev. "Jemmy's" gun in the corner was not always pleasant to them.

Gradually, however, folks got quite used to it, and as, after being carried about for a couple of years and deposited in the corner of half the cottages in Bishop Orton, it had never been known to go off, it was pronounced to be a harmless creature.

The parson and his gun was a familiar sight in the streets of Bishop Orton for a time, and then gradually folks began to notice that the rev. gentleman didn't go shooting and didn't carry a gun.

"What's become o' 'Jemmy's' gun?" asked the curious, but nobody could say.

Once the butcher put it to the rev. gentleman plainly.

"Hoo is't thee niver goes shootin' neow, parson?" he asked one day.

The Rev. James smiled and shook his head and went on his way, and so Jones concluded that the question wasn't an agreeable one.

The truth is, that when the Rev. James arrived at Bishop Orton he had, as you are aware, for luggage, in addition to his gun-case, a carpet-bag. Now, this carpet-bag contained his surplice, and that with his gun and the clothes he wore constituted his earthly possessions.

One day a dreadful accident happened to that surplice.

It had been sent to wash to the house of a bull pup to give the wife of the bull pup's master, who was a washerwoman, a turn, and the bull pup, being left to his own devices in the back garden, where it was hanging out to dry, did sacrilegiously and wickedly, being doubtless lured thereto by the Evil One, get it down and sport with it and worry it, enjoying himself to such an extent that in a short space of time it was in strips, and damaged beyond repair.

The washerwoman, horrified at the disaster, went to the Rev. James's lodgings and told her tale with tears in her eyes. She would make it good, she would buy another, and, oh, she was so sorry—and ought the dog to be killed?

The good soul had a faint idea that the act of impiety on the part of the bull pup brought him under the anathema of Mother Church.

The Rev. James was grieved, but he knew that the poor woman was in a sore strait, and could ill afford to make good his loss. In his easy-going way he comforted her. The loss was nothing. The surplice was old. It was time he bought himself another.

The good-hearted parson talked so glibly of his misfortune that the washerwoman dried her eyes, and eventually trotted off home fully persuaded that she had done the parson a real service, and that the bull pup who was at the bottom of the affair ought to be canonised rather than excommunicated.

When she was gone, and the Rev. James sat alone in his humble lodgings with his bread-and-cheese dinner in front of him, he began to review the situation, for it was a serious one.

He must have a surplice to preach in on Sunday. There was no one in the neighbourhood to lend him one. He counted up all the money he had about him, and it wasn't

enough. He must send the order to town that day and enclose a P.O.O., and he hadn't sufficient. His little means had been terribly crippled of late. The poor old bed-ridden mother had been worse, and all he could spare had gone to her. Suddenly his eye rested on his gun.

He would sell it!

He shuddered. His gun had a history. It had been his elder brother's—had belonged to poor dead Ned, and it was all he had left to remind him of their lifelong love for each other. No ; he couldn't sell it.

He went out for a little walk to think, and walking he passed the shop of Mr. Sweetapple, the pawnbroker. He stopped and looked at the pledges in the window. One was a gun. Why shouldn't he pledge his gun ? It wouldn't be parting with it.

Half an hour afterwards the sole companion of his life had gone from its accustomed resting-place. The pawnbroker had it, and the Rev. James carried a ticket for it in his waistcoat pocket.

It was a long time before Bishop Orton saw "Jemmy" go by with his gun again, but everybody noticed next Sunday that he had a new surplice on.

* * * * *

The mellow autumn came round and the crack of the gun was heard continually in the pleasant woods of Bishop Orton. The Rev. James tried not to listen to it. It touched a tender chord in his heart.

Sitting at home with the window open to let in the bright afternoon sunshine, his eyes would wander far away to where the golden light tipped the red and brown leaves of the thickets, and where of old he had had many a day's quiet sport.

Then he would heave a sigh and look sorrowfully at the corner where his dear old gun had stood.

He hadn't many pleasures in life, God knows. He was rusting away body and mind among the boors, who treated him as *hail fellow well met*, and whose Sunday clothes made his poor old suit of threadbare black look doubly seedy. He wanted something to rouse him; something to bring back the memory of old times.

Thinking of his gun he thought of the dear brother, whose hand, now cold in death, had clasped it so often. Poor old Ned! He lay in a nameless grave far away under the Russian snows with a heap of other brave fellows who had fought and died in the cruel Crimean war.

The Rev. James grew sentimental. The autumnal glow, the fair prospect of the mellow-tinted woods, and the musical crack of the far-off guns woke all the dormant poetry of his nature. O for an hour with the dear old gun again!

The pawnbroker's shop was only two minutes' walk. He could get it out for a day. But to get it out money was wanted. He had no money to spare. The poor old mother wanted it all now. He remembered why he had pawned his gun, and *twifly* an idea shaped itself. His new surplice owed a debt of gratitude to his gun. Why should it not be paid?

It took him some time to make up his mind to an act which at first seemed inexcusable. But gradually he argued himself out of any little compunction he might at first have had, and before the sun went down he had a ticket for his surplice in his pocket and the dear old gun stood in the corner that had missed it so long.

The Rev. James made a fool of himself over that gun.

He hugged it like a baby, he kissed it and cried over it. And the next day he marched it in triumph through the streets, and Bishop Orton exclaimed with one voice, "Why, 'Jemmy's' out wi' his gun again!"

But the poor parson's pleasure was short-lived. Saturday came, and the surplice had to come out; so in went the gun. But on Monday the surplice was not wanted and the gun was. What had been done once could be done again. In went the surplice, and out came the gun. And by-and-by Mr. Sweetapple, who was discretion itself, knew that as sure as Saturday came he should have the Rev. "Jemmy's" gun to mind, and as sure as Monday came he should have his surplice.*

* * * * *

It was nine o'clock on Friday night in Bishop Orton, and the streets were just getting quiet. A few groups stood about in the market-place and outside the beerhouses, talking.

The shop of Mr. Sweetapple, the pawnbroker, was in the market-place. It was all close shut and barred, and the proprietor, his wife and daughter, were out at a friend's house spending the evening.

The eldest son was left at home to mind the place, and he had grumbled very much at not being allowed to join the family party. This was known because subsequently his words and acts were sworn to in a court of justice.

At seven the place was closed up, and the assistant went away, leaving young Sweetapple alone in the house. At nine the folks standing about the market-place detected a

* This curious arrangement was carried out exactly as here described. The Rev. "Jemmy" has long since gone over to the majority, but the pawnbroker still lives; and the subsequent events here detailed are well remembered by every inhabitant of Bishop Orton.

smell of burning, and began to glance about them ; in a few minutes they noticed a red glare in the upper windows of the pawnbroker's shop, and then young Sweetapple came rushing out crying aloud that the place was on fire.

In a short time the market-place was full of people. The cry had gone round that the pawnbroker's was on fire. Men tore madly off for the engines, the flames burst through the roof and roared up towards the sky.

The crowd in the market-place grew and grew, some maniac rushed off and rang the church bells, and the people came pouring in from the outlying villages.

Tears and lamentations, groans and curses, filled the air. The poor folks wailed forth piteous tales of ruin, dilating on the household gods they had entrusted to the care of their "uncle" ; and still the flames rolled on.

Help came at last. The engines thundered into the market-place, the crowd surged to and fro, and the police beat the people back that the firemen might work.

Over the roar of the fire and the hissing of the water that played upon the burning walls there rose the cries of an angry populace whose belongings were being sacrificed before their very eyes.

The poor people were loudest in their cries and ejaculations as bundle after bundle of clothing, furniture, bedding, fire-irons, pictures, and all the miscellaneous articles of a pawnbroker's stock were hurled into the street.

What was the fabled shower of frogs to the showers of flannel petticoats and flat-irons that burst upon the astonished gaze of Bishop Orton as the firemen rushed in to rescue what they might !

But it was not the people who made the most noise that suffered most.

Standing among the crowd were hundreds of well-dressed folks, respectable householders, tradespeople, and professional men, who were supposed not to know what a "duplicate" meant, and it was evident from their pale and anxious faces that they had a personal interest in the pledges now rapidly becoming burnt offerings.

Even the squire from the hall came galloping in on his coal-black mare, and when he reined up in the market-place cried out with an oath that his family plate was in the pawnbroker's keeping.

Among the great crowd, all more or less personally interested in the destruction of property still going on, no one noticed the parson.

But he stood there, a little way apart, watching the progress of the flames with a pale face and trembling lips.

"Thank God I've got poor Ned's gun safe!" he murmured.

That was his only consolation. There in the universal wreck he knew his surplice must be. Shame had come that night to many a one in Bishop Orton, but to none did it come so vividly as to poor parson "Jemmy" as he thought that now all his parishioners would know he had pawned his surplice.

To-morrow was Saturday. If when the fire was out it was found to be destroyed—and there seemed little chance that anything but the jewellery and plate could be saved—whatever should he do?

Still, in the middle of all his trouble he kept murmuring, "Thank God I've got poor Ned's gun!"

By eleven o'clock the fire was got under, and the police took possession, or the people would have broken through and searched for their imperilled belongings among the *debris*.

It was one before the crowd thinned down and broke up. That night there were heavy hearts in Bishop Orton, and none heavier than that of the penniless clergyman, who wondered what on earth he should do on Sunday for a surplice.

* * * * *

On Saturday there was greater excitement than ever in Bishop Orton. The fire was declared to be the result of design, and that afternoon young Sweetapple was arrested and lodged in gaol on the charge.

It was sworn at the subsequent trial that he had been heard to threaten his father should repent not allowing him to go out, and it was proved that he had been down in that part of the building where the fire originated with a light.

With him I have nothing to do here. The trial, after many adjournments, was concluded, and when all the evidence had been heard, a jury acquitted the lad of the crime charged against him.

How the fire originated does not much matter. Its consequences to the townfolk and the neighbouring villagers were terrible.

So many secrets had slipped out in the excitement of the moment that half the people were ashamed to talk about it at all.

Folks who had always been supposed to be wealthy were proved to have pawned their plate. Pictures missing from drawing-rooms, and supposed to have been sent to London to be re-framed, were accounted for, and more than one tradesman in the town stood guilty on his own confession of having entrusted a portion of his stock to the loving avuncular guardianship of Mr. Sweetapple.

The air of Bishop Orton was heavy with scandal, and the

editor of the local organ, who was wont to be terribly witty in his leaders, was obliged to handle the subject very gingerly.

Had he not howled aloud in his misery that the timepiece presented to him by the town as a testimonial, and a mark of parochial gratitude for his glorious battle in defence of the parish pump, was in the fiery furnace?

All day Saturday the town talked of nothing but the fire and the arrest of young Sweetapple, and on Sunday morning the church was crowded, for everybody wanted to see everybody else and renew the discussion.

Several gentlemen did not put in an appearance, owing to a little accident to their Sunday suits, and more than one lady preferred staying away to showing by her diminished finery that the great event had affected her wardrobe.

Still, the church was crammed when the Rev. James Dawson took his place.

His face was very pale as he came from the vestry, but he walked to his desk with a firm step.

And then first a general “Oh!” and next a titter ran through the sacred edifice.

The rev. gentleman’s surplice was *burnt in three places!*

* * * * *

Parson “Jemmy,” as the folks of Bishop Orton used to call their good-hearted pastor, got over the shame and humiliation of that burnt surplice in time, and his flock thought none the worse of him for it.

They learned through it the sore straits to which his poverty and the burden of a poor bed-ridden old mother had reduced him.

They learned, too, in time, the life of self-denial he had led that he might minister to her wants, and it came to the

ears of the county families. That winter "a testimonial to the Rev. James Dawson" was announced, and a good round sum subscribed—a sum so round that it lit up the dull, grey sky of his life with pleasant sunbeams, and enabled him to soothe his mother's last hours with many comforts she must otherwise have gone without.

Ned's gun went no more to Mr. Sweetapple's, neither did the brand-new surplice his congregation presented him with.

There are hundreds of poor, starving clergymen in this land of ours—Christian gentlemen who toil on and bear their heavy burden without a sigh. Should any such light upon this true story, I hope they will not rush away and incontinently imitate the Rev. "Jemmy."

I am not at all sure that all congregations would act so kindly and thoughtfully as did the Bishop Ortonites if they found out that their parson was in the habit of "popping" his surplice.

PLEDGE XI.

A SILVER WATCH.

“PLAY you another fifty up, and bet you a dollar on the game!”

The speaker was one of the flash young gentlemen who haunt suburban billiard-rooms, who carry chalk in their pockets, and call the marker “Jack.”

The person spoken to was a well-dressed youth, with a refined, pleasing face, but pale and careworn.

“No, thanks,” he answered, “I’ll pay you what I’ve lost, and go. I have an appointment.” He pulled a few shillings from his pocket and handed them to his opponent, paid for the table, and left the room.

“What’s the matter with the young ’un, Jack?” said the flash young gentleman to the marker; “he seems down in the mouth.”

The marker gave a knowing wink. “He’s goin’ where two or three o’ the young coves as used to come here’s gorn. To the devil.”

* * * * *

Outside the Lord Elgin, right under the big red lamp on which the legend “Billiards and Pool” was inscribed in milk-white letters, Carl Hartzberg stood thinking.

It was he who had just left the billiard-room above, and he was waiting here because he had an appointment. He was expecting his “young lady.”

She came round the corner presently, a pretty, modest-looking girl, apparently about the same age as Carl.

He met her in a brusque, off-hand way, and said sharply, "I thought I told you to be here at nine?"

"Yes, dear, but I couldn't get away before. I was kept late at the warehouse."

"All right, Lottie. Forgive me. I'm cross and out of sorts to-night. I'm in great trouble."

"Oh, Carl, what trouble?"

The girl looked up at him with anxious eyes.

"Well, I can't tell you all"—here the lad's voice trembled—"but I'm afraid I must go away."

The girl caught his arm and clutched it nervously.

"Carl, don't deceive me. Tell me, are you not in trouble about money? Oh, I knew," she went on when he made no reply, "I knew that those young fellows you have been about with would do you no good. Oh, Carl, why didn't you see more of me, and less of them?"

"God help me, Lottie, I wish I had. If I'd listened to you I should never have been in the mess I am in now."

"Tell me the worst, Carl."

She looked so earnestly into his face that the young man changed colour.

"The worst! What do you mean?" he stammered.

"Do you think I have been blind all these months, Carl? You have been betting and gambling. Where has the money come from?"

"Listen, Lottie, and I'll tell you. I shall feel easier when it's off my mind. When I got hard up and couldn't pay what I lost over the races and the billiards, I—I

borrowed some money in the City. I meant to pay it back, upon my soul I did. I used the money I collected for the firm, little sums of five and six pounds. I was sure I should win over the Derby and be able to pay them back, and I lost, and now, oh, Lottie, I don't know what I shall do. The quarterly accounts were sent in again to-night, and to-morrow all will be known."

The girl's face had gone whiter and whiter as her young sweetheart stammered out his dreadful story.

She had not suspected this. She knew he was a clerk in the City, and that his salary was small, and she knew he could not afford to gamble and keep fast company night after night. But the worst she had anticipated was that he had run into debt.

For a time the shock was so terrible she could not speak.

Carl misinterpreted her silence.

"Lottie," he cried, with a trembling voice, "you despise me, you shrink away from me. I deserve it."

She was by his side in a moment

"No, Carl—no. I love you as I never loved you before, and I pity you. Let others judge you harshly, I will not. Oh, Carl, Carl! I would have given my life to have saved you this shame."

He caught her to his breast in the quiet street.

"God bless you, Lottie, for those words. They will comfort me when I am far away."

"Far away!"

"Yes; I must seek safety in flight. I cannot face the exposure, and perhaps—perhaps the dock."

The girl shuddered.

"Yes," he continued, "I will tell you all. To-morrow

I shall get away. I will write to you, but you must never let anyone know my address."

"And your father and mother, Carl? It will kill them."

"Don't talk like that, Lottie, or I shall go mad. Poor mother!—poor old dad!—I dare not tell them. You must go to them when I am gone and break it gently to them."

Talking earnestly, the girl and her lover went through the quiet streets. At ten o'clock Carl left Lottie at her mother's door, and kissing her passionately hurried home.

* * * * *

Carl Hartzberg the elder sat waiting for his boy to come home.

Mrs. Hartzberg, who was an invalid, had gone to bed, and the old gentleman was left alone.

His face was grave and anxious, for these illnesses of his wife's were becoming more and more serious. The doctor said she required rest, and that her strength must be kept up with delicacies. And Carl Hartzberg was poor. He had had a hard fight with the world, and the task of educating his family had told heavily on him. Twenty years ago he had left his native land and wandered to the famous home of freedom—the refuge for the exile of every clime.

Carl Hartzberg in his hot youth had spoken too boldly for the Fatherland. He had been compelled to fly with his young wife and seek an alien shore. His name was treasured still in the annals of his native town. It was a name which had been borne in the quaint old German *stadt* for generations unblemished. But Carl had dared to be a Radical and zealous in the cause of liberty.

So when danger threatened he had wandered forth and found a home among strangers. He had had to begin life anew, but, aided by his faithful Gretchen, he had struggled bravely, and the children that had been born to them had always had a comfortable home. Now the poor old frau had done her work, and the busy hands were weak. He, too, was going down the hill, and once again trouble had come to him.

In the great depression of trade the German firm for whom he had been the English agent had failed, and that very day he had received a letter from Hamburg stating that his agency was closed.

Of his children only Carl was now left him. One son had married and had a home of his own to keep together; another had gone to a far-away country and forgotten them; and now Carl, his handsome Carl, was his sole comfort and support.

Often when he felt the feebleness of age creeping on, and thought of the day when he should be past work, he comforted himself with the thought that Carl would help them. Carl was clever, he would be a great man, and keep his poor old father and mother, and hand down the name untarnished to another generation.

Eleven struck, and as the chimes died away Carl let himself in, and came to where his father sat.

“You are late, mein poy,” said the old man, kindly.

“Yes, father. I saw Lottie home.”

“Ah! And how is Mees Lottie?”

“Oh, she’s all right, father.”

“I am glad of dat, mein sohn. She shall be just ze sort of frau for you. Ze bonnie Englisher madchen, dere is none like zem.”

Twenty years in England had not made old Hartzberg a fluent talker.

"Sit you down, Carl. You are tired, mein sohn."

"Yes, I am, father, rather."

"You work too hard in ze Citee. Ah, you all be has partner some fine day."

Carl gave an involuntary sigh.

"Ah, mein poy," said the old man, his eyes filling with tears; "I sank Gott efry day He have gif me such a sohn. Your mudder is veak, and I am an old man; but you vill tak care of us, vill not you, ven de poor old fadder can't not vork no more?"

A great sob rose in the young lad's throat. He ran to his father and kissed him as he used to do when he was a little child. Then, with a faltering voice, he cried, "God bless you, dear old dad!" and ran from the room, leaving the old man in a state of amazement.

* * * * *

The next morning Carl went into his mother's bedroom, and bade her good day. She thought the tears in his eyes were for her suffering, and she tried to comfort him.

His father had gone out after the early breakfast, and there was no one to notice that Carl carried his little portmanteau out of the house with him.

That evening Lottie Curtis came with a white, frightened face to see the old couple. She was Carl's messenger. He had not dared to leave a confession behind him. To his brave little sweetheart he entrusted the task of breaking the awful news to his parents.

Lottie found the old gentleman alone, and bit by bit stammered out her terrible secret.

He seemed at first not to understand.

But when the full meaning of the girl's story—a tale told with sobs and tears—dawned upon the unhappy father, a spasm of fearful anguish swept across his face, leaving the features distorted.

For a brief space a terrible silence reigned ; then, with a wild cry, he fell upon his knees, and raising his trembling hands to heaven, moaned aloud, “ Oh, Gott, forgif him ; Oh, mein sohn, mein sohn ! ”

Presently Lottie calmed him a little, and he clasped her hand and clung to her. She was something for him to love now. She had seen his boy last. But he broke down again, and, laying his head upon the girl's shoulder, sobbed like a child.

Night fell upon the little household and found the young girl and the old man still in tears. The two broken hearts clung to each other in their agony, and it was late ere they parted. Then the father went sadly up stairs and laid him down by the side of the old wife, and told her the first lie his lips had ever uttered.

“ Carl has had to go into the country for the firm, Gretchen,” he said. “ He sent for his portmanteau ; he started in a hurry.”

And the old lady smiled and blessed her boy. “ See how he is honoured by his employers,” she whispered. “ Ah, Carl, I thank God for giving us such a son.”

And down in a seaport town Carl Hartzberg lay that night in a little inn, tortured with fear and remorse.

Ere he left he had sold all he possessed to raise sufficient money to get away with.

But one thing he had not sold. It was the silver watch which had been his grandfather's and his father's,

and which his father had given him on his fourteenth birthday. He could not part with that, for it was an heirloom, and there was a legend in the family that to part with it was unlucky; but he needed every penny he could get, so he pawned it, determining directly he earned some money to send the ticket to Lottie with the sum lent on it.

* * * * *

On the following day the firm discovered his defalcations, and about the same time that the discovery was made Carl Hartzberg's father called and was shown into their private room.

The interview was a painful one. The old man, with tearful eyes and a trembling voice, came to plead for mercy—to beg that the good name he had won by twenty years of honest work and upright conduct in the land of his adoption might not be publicly disgraced.

He pleaded, too, for his boy. He told them what a good son he had been.

“And mein poor frau,” he wailed, dashing the tears from his eyes, “if she should know dis ting it vould kill her. I am poor, shentlemen, but if I can pay dis money I vill starve to save mein frau and mein sohn.”

The partners were stern business men, but the sight of the old man's agony overcame their first scruples. They would promise nothing more than this, however—no active search should be made for the present.

“You say he has gone away,” said the senior partner. “Well, let him keep away. If he returns to London he must be arrested. If he comes within reach, and we take no steps, it will be said that we can be robbed with impunity. We should have to prosecute him as an example to the others.”

The old gentleman thanked the partners, and with a bowed head went sadly home.

* * * *

Carl's mother in time learned the truth.

The shock was terrible, but Lottie was a ministering angel then. She came to them, and buoyed the poor mother's heart with hope. Carl was safe somewhere, and he would soon write to her.

Sure enough a letter came, telling her he had been lucky—that under an assumed name he had got work. He had pretended that he had come over from Germany to get a situation, and as someone was wanted who spoke German he got the place without a character. The letter was full of repentance and remorse, and promises to atone for the past.

Lottie answered the letter, enclosing a line in the mother's trembling hand—just a message of love and forgiveness to her poor lamb that had gone astray.

A week afterwards Carl wrote again, enclosing Lottie the ticket of the silver watch, and bidding her take care of it till he sent her the money to redeem it.

The letter was never delivered, but three days afterwards a postman was arrested charged with stealing letters. His lodgings were searched, and among other things found there was Carl's letter containing the pawn-ticket. Carl was wanted as a witness by the Post Office authorities. There was an address in the letter, and the ticket was made out to Carl Hartzberg, No. —, St. Mary-axe.

Carl had pawned his watch in the City the day before his flight, and the pawnbroker's shop being opposite his employer's place of business, the assistant knew him, and put down his right address.

A clerk from the solicitor's office went to St. Mary-axe with the ticket and asked for Carl Hartzberg. He was referred to the senior partner, and explained his business.

"I called here to see if the owner was here," he said, "before sending to Portsmouth."

"Oh," said the senior partner; "then you have his address at Portsmouth."

"Yes. It is on the letter in which the ticket was enclosed. (Pulling out the letter.) Here it is."

The senior partner took the letter, made a note of the address, and returned it to the clerk.

"You will subpoena him from Portsmouth, I suppose?" he said.

"As he is not here, certainly. He will be an important witness."

"You can save yourself the trouble. He will be in London the day after to-morrow, and I will let you know his address."

The clerk went away, and that afternoon a City police-officer went down to Portsmouth with the warrant for the arrest of Carl Hartzberg the younger.

The junior partner was away collecting orders and cash in the country, and the senior partner acted according to his own notions.

"His name will be in the paper over this post office robbery," he said, "and the clerks will say we don't mind being robbed if we take no steps. Better take them at once than let it appear they are forced on us."

* * * * *

Carl Hartzberg returning to his lodgings in Portsmouth that night found a tall man waiting to see him.

He gave a little cry of fear, for the thought of arrest was

always in his mind, and turned to run, but it was too late. The tall man stood in front of the door.

“Come quietly, young gentleman, and then there’ll be no disgrace,” he said. “I’m your brother, and I’ve come to see you, and we are going out for a walk. You don’t want to be handcuffed, do you?”

The lad, alternately white with fear and red with shame, shook his head.

That night they went up to London by the mail train. Half-way there was a terrific crash. Carl went flying against the detective, and both of them lay very still with a lot of things on top of them, and then the air was filled with shrieks and groans. Carl wriggled out feeling stunned and bruised, but the detective lay quite still.

When Carl had shaken himself he looked about him, and a fearful sight met his eyes.

They had run into a train of trucks, and a lot of the carriages were smashed. The line was strewn with the wreckage, and in the dim light he could see people fighting and struggling among the *debris*.

Those who were unhurt leapt out of the carriages and helped to extricate whom they could. Some were beyond help, terribly crushed and mangled, and dead. Carl stood like a man in a dream, and rubbed his eyes, wondering where he was.

Presently he heard a stifled groan. There was a gentleman lying under the wreck of a first-class carriage. Carl rushed to him, and proceeded to throw the cushions and seats and the portmanteaus off him.

Soon he had him free, and then he dragged him out and laid him on the bank.

He was quite senseless. The other people were working

away at the sufferers still in the wreck, and Carl called to them in vain. O if he only had a drop of brandy!

Something shining caught his eye. He ran to the broken-down carriage. It was the gentleman's brandy flask, and there also, beside it, was a canvas bag.

Carl picked it up. It was very heavy.

The gentleman still lay senseless on the bank, so Carl poured some brandy into his mouth.

Gradually he gathered his senses together and sat up. Then Carl said to him, "Sir, here is a bag of money I found in the wreck of your carriage. Does it belong to you?"

"Yes," said the gentleman eagerly "Oh, thank you. There is nearly a thousand pounds there!"

The voice startled the lad. He looked earnestly in the gentleman's face, then gave a cry of shame.

It was the junior partner of the firm he had robbed of about five-and-twenty pounds.

The cry astonished the gentleman.

Then he, too, recognised his deliverer in the lad who had given him a thousand pounds when he might have run off with it and no one have been the wiser.

Carl told his story, and then they both went to look for the detective.

They found him laid on the bank, covered with a rug. He was dead.

* * * * *

A fortnight afterwards there was a little family party at the house of Herr Hartzberg.

First, there was the old man himself, with a long absent smile once more lighting up his kind old face; then there was the frau in an easy chair, propped up with pillows, and

looking, with a whole world of love in her eyes, at a young couple who sat opposite to her.

One of them was Lottie Curtis, a bright red blush upon her cheeks, and her little hand clasped, O so tightly ! by a young gentleman whom we have seen before.

The junior partner had been grateful both for his life and his money. When he returned to London with a full knowledge of the lad's story, he went straight to the magistrate who had granted the warrant and explained that circumstances had come to light which induced him to withdraw from the prosecution.

The junior partner did more than this. He was so convinced that Carl had been tempted to take the money fully intending to pay it back, and that he had bitterly repented, that he determined to give him another chance, and so the lad was to travel for them at a good salary.

It is the night before Carl starts on his first journey, and mother and father and Lottie are all with him talking over the great event.

“ Ah, Carl,” says the father, “ the good Gott has heard mein prayers and gif me pack mein sohn again.”

The old mother puts out her thin hand and takes her boy's, and strokes it, and as he comes nearer to her and drops at her feet, she lays that trembling hand upon his curly hair and blesses him.

And somehow Lottie has crept up to her, and presently she kneels too, and then the old lady, her eyes filling with tears, blesses them both.

Supper comes, and sentiment disappears for a time with the savoury smell of the good housewife's little German dishes.

At supper Carl pulls out his watch to look at the time. He has given his evidence, claimed the ticket, and redeemed it.

"I shall never part with this again, father," he says, as he puts it gently back; "but it didn't bring me such bad luck, after all; for if I hadn't pawned it the pawn-ticket wouldn't have been stolen, and I should still have been an outcast."

"The ways of Providence are mysterious, mein sohn; let us thank the good Gott for His mercy."

PLEDGE XII.

A PAIR OF BOOTS.

BARTON'S-BUILDINGS was doomed. The fiat had gone forth that the world should know Barton's-buildings no more.

It was a vile, unholy place—a collection of crazy tenements where the poorest of the poor herded together in squalor and filth and pestilence. It was a place where men, women, and children lay together twenty in a room, like pigs in a sty, where fever and disease were always to be found and a policeman very seldom.

It had a bad name had Barton's-buildings, and when people heard that it was to be pulled down under the provisions of the Artisans Dwellings Act, it was felt that an eyesore was about to disappear from the metropolis.

It was the last day in Barton's-buildings.

From early morning the narrow street had been blocked with the goods of the colony.

Up from cellars and kitchens, down from top floors and garrets, came the inhabitants, laden with such things as they possessed.

They had lingered on till the last, many of these poor creatures refusing to stir until the strong arm of the law forced them from their hiding-place.

The police were in the alley, the inspector had been from house to house ; tears and oaths were alike ineffectual—the hour had come, and the little colony must wander

forth and settle where it could. To-morrow the pick and the spade of the labourer would ring out loud and clear, and brick by brick the place would be razed to the ground.

Slowly the people file out, bringing with them their scanty treasures.

Here and there a truck is called into requisition by the property-owners, the nobility of the buildings, who possess something carryable in the shape of a bed and perhaps a couple of chairs and a frying-pan.

But there are few families who cannot bear among them their furniture and effects, for the effects, as a rule, are small and the families are large.

It is a ghastly exodus, a procession of misery such as few modern towns could furnish. It is in the heart of London, the jewelled mistress of the cities, that penury and starvation are to be found in their most terrible forms. It is in the garden bright with flowers that the rankest weeds abound.

Sorrowfully the outcasts come from the rookery that has been their home for years. Vile and awful as the dens were, they have become attached to them; they have grown used to the foul air, the reeking walls, and the crumbling staircases. They have crept here at night and found shelter; wandering forth day by day to fight for bread, they have known that hither could they bear it and find the young in the nest, that they had somewhere to lay their weary bones and aching heads, somewhere to call "home."

The bulk of the last lingerers have passed away, some to other rookeries, some to the workhouse, some to shelter which they have procured at the cost of half their poor earnings.

Day by day, as the old haunts of the poor are destroyed

to make room for palatial "model lodgings" and "artisans' dwellings," it has become a harder task for them to find shelter. The gorgeous buildings reared on the site of their vaunted homes are far beyond their humble means, and the few existing places of the old-fashioned sort are crammed to suffocation.

But go forth they must and look for shelter "somewhere." It is not the duty of the law to inquire where, but to make them "move on."

Out of Barton's-buildings the exiles pass, lingering sadly as they go. Old men and women come out like rats from their holes, blinking in the daylight—some of them so aged and infirm that they have to be borne in the arms of their kindred.

Here comes a strange creature with blurred features and misshapen limbs, trembling in her yellow rags and moaning with terror. It is ten long years since she saw the outer world. Why? That no one can tell you. There are mysteries in the courts and alleys of Babylon that none can divine.

There go an old man and woman, with their little granddaughter guiding their tottering steps. The old man and his wife made toys, and the child took them out and sold them. The man is half imbecile, and he is crying and saying that he shall die in the streets. He has lived his life in Barton's-buildings, and has taken root there.

So through the long day the panorama of human wretchedness passes before the eyes of the official on-looker. His task is nearly over, the houses are all but empty. Those who remain will be flung into the street if they refuse to go, and their belongings, if they have any, will be flung after them, and then the work of ejection will be done.

The police make another tour of inspection. All gone. Nothing but filth and rubbish and rags left now to tell of the vanished colony.

Stay. What is this lying here, at the foot of the stairs? A woman. And over her bends a man—a thin, wretched creature, with sunken eyes and haggard cheeks. He has dragged himself from the rags where he lay, the ague racking his every bone, and has taken his blind wife by the hand and told her that the hour has come—that they must wander forth into the streets.

Down from the attic he has crawled with trembling knees, leading the sightless creature, the only thing to care for him that he has left.

Five years ago Nelly Stevens looked upon her husband's face one winter morning for the last time. The state of life into which it had pleased God to call her was to toy with sudden death for a paltry wage at a great firework factory. When the usual explosion came Nelly was dragged out from a heap of mangled women.

Some were dying, some were dead and dismembered. Nelly was one of the lucky ones. She only lost her eyes, and could do no more work for the remainder of her days.

To the hospital in due time came her husband, and led her back to the only home he could afford, now that he had to work for both.

For he too played with death that he might live, but it was a longer game than Nell's. Death came slowly to the looking-glass silverer. The long hours in a close room absorbing the mercury into the system led rather to disablement than death. There is a delightful condition of body called the shakes which comes to silverers after a time.

It is a modified sort of St. Vitus's dance, a trembling of the limbs and a perpetual quivering of the muscles.

Jack was down with the shakes about the time Nelly's eyes were lost that boys might have cheap squibs and crackers, and, of course, he was no use as a silverer. There weren't many jobs that a man with dancing arms and legs could do, and Jack dropped from thirty shillings a week to twelve. At that price the fragments of a constitution still left to him were utilised.

So it came about that the shaky husband and the blind wife drifted to an attic in Barton's-buildings, and there they struggled on with love and an occasional meal to cheer them.

Jack had only one comfort in his wife's blindness. She couldn't see the wreck he had become. It was only when in the cold night they huddled close together for warmth that she felt the arm round her quivering and trembling. That was the cold, he told her, and took it away.

Perhaps it was a blessing too when the food ran short, and Jack was able to put it all on her side of the table and make a great noise with his jaws, and smack his lips with a fidelity to nature worthy of a pantomimic artist.

But blind people have keen perceptions, and Nelly soon found out that her husband was growing weaker and weaker, and that the fatal mercury had too surely done its work.

His flesh and blood were utilised in outdoor work. He was a sort of human scarecrow to frighten thievish boys and old ladies in search of firewood from a builder's yard, and, having the necessary mercury in his system, he became a human barometer. It was the winter and the wet weather that found out the weak spot. He suffered agonies with

rheumatism and ague, but he battled on bravely and brought his twelve shillings a week home regularly to his blind wife.

Things were at their worst when Barton's-buildings was doomed. Long exposure to the weather had broken up the human barometer, and he couldn't stand in the yard. He hadn't been to work for a fortnight when the last day came, and Nelly had cried her heart out over him, for his moans told her the anguish he was suffering, and the tears had poured down from her sightless eyes on to his cheeks as she bent over him and comforted him.

They had kept body and soul together as the poor do. Their little possessions were all in safe keeping in a beautiful fireproof warehouse.

The ejectment notice had struck dismay into their hearts. Like many another member of the colony, they had lingered on till the last because they had nowhere else to go.

But when the day came and the tramp of the neighbours and the bustle below told them that the utmost limit of indulgence was passed, then and then only did the full horror of the situation burst upon them.

Go they must. What was it to the law that death and starvation lay before them? Their attic was wanted that the "artisan" might have a suite of apartments in a palatial hotel. The Government had taken the artisan under its protection, in order that he might have rooms at from ten to fifteen shillings a week, instead of paying, as heretofore, the extravagant sum of five shillings and seven and six-pence, or wasting his substance on a nice little cottage with a garden in the suburbs for about four.

Jack crawled from his rags, shouldered his bundle, and

took his blind wife by the hand, for the hour had come, and they were driven out. Shaking and trembling, and racked with pain, he got her down to the foot of the staircase, and then she gave way, as weak women will, and fell down and cried to think that they were leaving the shelter of that vile place which had been home to them so long.

The policeman was used to such sights by this time, and so he just bade them "Come out of that" in the kindest tone consistent with his uniform.

Then Nelly pulled herself together, and held out her hand, and Jack took it and staggered out into the street.

"We must find somewhere to sleep to-night, Jack, dear."

"Ay, ay, my lass," he answered, looking back, "we'll find a place—somewhere."

So the last couple passed out of Barton's-buildings, and there was nothing to hinder the Artisans Dwellings Act doing its noble work.

* * * * *

Night came down on the London streets; a cold, heartless night, with a keen, searching east wind. The street lamps were lit, and the shops were gay with gas, when six o'clock struck. But few people stopped to peer through the plate-glass windows. The playful breeze had a trick of darting round corners at you, and nipping your nose and cutting your eyes, so coat collars were turned up and footsteps bent hastily homeward.

Toiling wearily along a main thoroughfare came the man with the shakes leading his blind wife.

The east wind cut through him like a knife, and he crawled along in the supremest physical agony, trying not to shiver lest the sightless creature holding his hand should know how cold and wretched he was.

On through the lighted thoroughfare they passed, till they came to where the gas was dimmer and the shops less gay, and so out into a northern suburb of the metropolis.

It was there that the only friend Jack had in the world, an old fellow-workman, lived. Of him he was going to crave shelter for awhile, till he could get a job and find another home.

The thought of this refuge had buoyed him with hope throughout the afternoon's tramp.

They reached the house and found strangers in it. Jack's mate had left a fortnight since.

The door was shut in their faces, and the blind woman and her husband turned their faces once more to the pitiless night.

What was to be done?

There was a common lodging-house not far off, but they had no money.

“We must go to the casual ward, Nelly,” the man said presently, with a faltering voice. “There’s no help for it.”

The woman shuddered. Had it come to this at last! O, anything but that! She was tired and faint, and burst out crying.

They were just opposite a pawnbroker’s then, and suddenly an idea came to Jack.

“Stay there a minute, Nell,” he said, “while I go and ask the way.”

Then he darted into the pawnbroker’s, slipped off his boots, which were still good, and they lent him a shilling on them.

He came out and walked on a little way, and then gave a cry of pleasure.

“Here’s luck, Nell,” he said, as cheerily as his chattering

teeth would let him. "I've found a shilling in my pocket. You shall have a bed and a crust to-night, after all, Nell; and to-morrow I'll go to work and earn something."

He felt the hand he held tighten in his. The terror of the casual ward had passed away for a time. The pavement numbed the shoeless feet terribly. An icy thrill shot up the aching limbs to the heart, and seemed to grip it with fingers of stone, but Jack kept bravely on his way till they came to the spot where he knew the lodging-house used to be.

In its place they found a ruin—a wilderness of bricks and rubbish.

And in the faint light of the quivering lamps Jack read that this was the site of a new block of artisans' dwellings.

The shock of disappointment and despair completed the work the cold and the fatigue had commenced. The brave limbs failed at last, and Jack could go no further.

The blind wife felt his hand slip from hers, and heard him sink to the ground.

"God help us this night, Nell," he moaned, "for I can go no further. I've lost the use of my limbs."

"Oh, Jack, try. Let us go to the workhouse—anywhere. The cold will kill you."

Jack staggered up and made a desperate effort, but his limbs refused their office. He clung to his wife for support.

Across the ruin he could see one house but half destroyed. The walls and a portion of the roof still stood.

"If I can crawl yonder, Nell," he said presently, "I can lie there a bit out of the wind. Hold me up and I'll lead you."

Dragging himself as best he could across the heaps of rubbish and scattered brick, his feet cut and gashed at every

step, Jack brought himself and his wife to the little haven at last.

There was one corner quite out of the wind, and here he fell down on a heap of rubbish and lay quite still.

He had fainted with the pain and fatigue and the exposure. Nell called him, but he did not answer.

Then she knelt down and passed her hands along his prostrate body.

She was terrified. Blind and alone in the dark night on a rude tract of waste ground, what could she do?

She must go for help at once.

Staggering and falling, groping blindly across the brick heaps and mounds of rubbish, she went out into the night calling, "Help! Help!"

Suddenly she felt a heavy blow on the forehead, and then she knew no more. Wandering in her blind helplessness she had come full force against the carcase of a half-destroyed building, and the blow had stunned her.

* * * * *

When consciousness returned to her she was warm and comfortable, but her head ached and was wrapped in bandages. She thought she had been dreaming, and had just woke up in her own home in Barton's-buildings.

"Jack," she said softly, "where are you?"

A woman's voice answered her.

"What is it, my dear?"

Then she recollected all.

She sat up in an agony of fear, trying with her sightless eyes to pierce the eternal darkness.

"Where am I?" she cried—"where's Jack?"

"You're in the hospital," answered the woman. "Who's Jack?"

"My husband. Oh, please tell me where he is!"

"My good soul, I dare say he's all right," answered the woman, trying to comfort her. "Don't you worry yourself —you must be quite still if you want to get well."

"How did I come here?" asked Nell.

"You were found among the ruins where they've pulled down the houses to build model lodgings," answered the woman. "Somebody heard you calling for help, and they found you lying senseless, with a nasty cut across your forehead."

"But Jack, my husband, did they find him too?"

The nurse did not know what to say, but it was her business to keep her patient quiet, and so she answered, "Oh, yes, he's all right!"

And then she forced the blind woman to lie still, and gave her an opiate to send her to sleep again, for the wound was dangerous, and any excitement might lead to bad consequences.

As a matter of fact, Jack had not been found. When the blind woman was discovered bleeding the cry for help was explained, and she was carried away to the hospital.

Who was to know that among the ruins of one of the dismantled houses lay a dying man?

While she was unconscious in the ward of the hospital, Jack lay senseless where he had fallen on the heap of rubbish.

The night grew colder and colder, and the limbs of the wanderer grew stiffer and stiffer.

He never woke from the syncope into which he had fallen to miss the blind wife who had wandered forth for help.

He lay there calm and still, paying no rent for two whole

days and nights, and when the workmen came to that part of the ground and discovered a bootless tramp there was no difficulty in finding a home for him.

In the parish mortuary, not yet swept away to make room for artisans' dwellings, this tired toiler was allowed to lie undisturbed by ejections.

They put beside him, for the purposes of identification, all that was found upon him—a pawn-ticket for a pair of boots.

* * * * *

On the spot where Barton's-buildings stood there is now a block of magnificent houses, let out in suites of apartments. Dainty muslin curtains and neat blinds grace the windows. The "models" are governed by rules which require that all the tenants shall be respectable. Etiquette is studied here in all its branches. Gentlemen are requested not to lean out of window in their shirtsleeves, and dogs and cats are not allowed. Pianos on the three years' hire system are plentiful.

Neat traps stop at the doors on Sundays, and little family parties emerge elegantly attired for a drive.

These are the buildings designed and built under the provisions of the Artisans Dwellings Act. It is to provide these charming chambers that the poor are driven out into the street to find shelter where they can or perish by the way.

To deny that the measure is beneficial in any sense would be absurd. It is a boon to the large class of well-to-do artisans, and clerks with moderate incomes, who don't want to be bothered with a house, and who find it convenient to be provided by philanthropy with elegant apartments at a less price than they could obtain them of the ordinary lodging-house keepers.

For these the humbler artisans, and the myriad toilers whose means of obtaining a livelihood are limited and precarious, are driven forth; and daily they find the question, “Where shall I lay my head?” an enigma so difficult of solution that many of them give it up in despair and compromise the matter by selecting the churchyard or the workhouse.

Of those who wandered forth from Barton’s-buildings, I have but traced the fate of two. The shaky looking-glass silverer is at rest where the parish put him. He has found lodgings at last where he will lie until the burial-ground is required for “artisans’ dwellings,” and then perhaps his thinly-covered bones may be thrown up with the shovel and “moved on” once more.

Tramping from casual ward to casual ward goes a poor sightless, ragged creature who once called the dead man husband. No loving hand leads her footsteps now; the last ray of light has flickered out from the eternal darkness of her life.

In God’s good time she too will come to her rest, and in the land where blind eyes open she may look once more upon the face of him she then loved—the man who went forth homeless at the bidding of the law, and died in the interests of philanthropy and industrial dwellings.

In that land there are many mansions. But they are not reared for the rich and well-to-do at the expense of the helpless poor. The wise and benevolent provisions of the Artisans Dwellings Act have not yet penetrated so far.

PLEDGE XIII.

A FLAT IRON.

MRS. GRINHAM was in a dreadful way about her boy Jemmy. Jemmy had been dispatched upon a private and confidential errand an hour since, and he ought to have been back in ten minutes.

Jemmy was such a good little boy, always doing his errands so nicely and so quickly, that his mother began to fear something must have happened to him. Furthermore, there was this fact to heighten her anxiety—Jemmy would have in his possession a small sum of money—a little temporary accommodation on good security, which Mrs. Grinham had found it necessary to negotiate for.

Mrs. Grinham this afternoon was the only figure in an English interior hardly picturesque enough to tempt the painter to reproduce it for Burlington House or Grosvenor Gallery *connoisseurs*.

It was a dirty kitchen in a dirty house in a dirty street in Lisson-grove. Mrs. Grinham was dirty too, for she had been “tidying-up”—that is, she had raised a cloud of dust with a bald-headed broom, and given the little table a dry rub with the skirt of her dress, and had put some odd pieces of crockery in the sink and turned the tap on them.

This last operation had been rendered necessary by the flight of time. It was nearly half-past five, and shortly after that hour Mr. Grinham would, as was his wont, return

to the domestic haven which he had quitted at the same hour in the morning, and Mr. Grinham would require his tea.

Presently Mrs. Grinham produced two cups and half a loaf and a small piece of butter from the cupboard, then she unscrewed a small paper and looked anxiously at the contents.

Yes; there were two teaspoonfuls left.

Mrs. Grinham gave a sigh of relief. Her lord could have his tea, although Jemmy had not returned with the anxiously-expected proceeds of the hypothecation of his mother's flat-iron.

Thanks to those two teaspoonfuls, Mr. Grinham's tea was ready for him whenever he liked to come.

He came presently, dusty and dirty and tired from his day's work, his hands in his pocket and his clay pipe in his mouth.

Mrs. Grinham wiped her hands on her apron, and began cutting bread-and-butter directly he appeared at the doorway

Her husband flung his hat into a corner and himself into a chair. Then he held out his hand, and Mrs. Grinham put a slice of thick bread-and-butter into it. He gave a grunt of satisfaction.

“Where's Jem?” he said presently, with his mouth full.

“I don't know,” answered Mrs. Grinham; “I'm getting nervous about him. I expect he's gone after Punch and Judy or some orgin-man.”

Mr. Grinham gave a grunt of dissatisfaction this time. In ten minutes he would have put away all the available bread-and-butter, and then he would want a smoke, and he hadn't a bit of tobacco left. He wanted Jemmy to go and fetch him a screw. Life was all trouble to Mr. Grinham.

Here he was tired with a day's work, and he might have to go and fetch his own tobacco or go without a smoke for a few minutes. Both alternatives were terrible to contemplate. He finished his bread-and-butter, drained his cup, licked the spoon, and then looked wofully at his empty pipe.

"Dang that there Jem ! he's never here when he's wanted," he growled. Then he pointed to his hat in the corner, and requested it might be given to him.

Mrs. Grinham, like a dutiful wife, picked it up and put it on his head. He rose from the chair with a grunt, and slouched out of the house.

Mr. Grinham was a blighted genius. He had a genius for doing nothing, and Fate had compelled him to work for his living. His principles were tinged with Communism, and he felt that he was oppressed and downtrodden by everybody who had twopence more than he had. He was fond of his wife and fond of his boy Jem in his lazy way. He was fond of them when they waited on him, and understood what he wanted with the least possible explanation.

He wasn't a clever workman, and he didn't get much wages ; this, he felt, was another gross injustice.

"Oh, if I was only rich," sighed Jem Grinham, "wouldn't I take it easy?" At present he was poor—so poor that he and his wife had hard work to keep their heads above water, and many were the shifts which the woman had to make to keep her lazy husband from sometimes going short of a meal.

Jemmy, the boy, and she were contented enough. They did all they could to make "father" comfortable. They knew he had been well brought up and ought to have been a gentleman, and they felt how highly honoured they were in having him for a husband and father.

When Mr. Grinham had departed in search of his tobacco, Jemmy's mother gave vent to her motherly anxiety. In her husband's presence she had restrained it. It was bad enough to be so pushed that the flat-iron had to go for a few coppers to carry on with, and now here was this worry about the boy.

She had good cause to worry, for Jemmy had been gone over an hour and a half just two streets off.

Mrs. Grinham went and stood at the door and looked up the street and down the street, and then she thought she would run across to the pawnbroker's and see if Jem had been there. He might have been run over, or lured away for the fourpence and his poor clothes. A hundred stories of the dangers of the London streets surged up into Mrs. Grinham's mind and increased her anxiety.

She was still standing at the door when a gentleman stopped in front of her. He was looking for the number of the house, but as the door was open he couldn't see it.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but can you tell me if a Mrs. Grinham lives here?" he said presently.

The woman's blood left her cheeks, and her heart gave a violent jump. Jemmy had been killed, and this gentleman had come to tell her about it.

"Is it about my Jemmy, sir?" she gasped out. "I'm Mrs. Grinham."

The gentleman raised his hat.

"I beg your pardon, madam, but can I speak a few words with you indoors?"

Mrs. Grinham, still violently agitated, led the way to the kitchen, and dusted a chair for the gentleman.

"You are, madam, I believe, Sarah Grinham, wife of

James Grinham, daughter of the late John Shuster, chimney-sweep, and sister of Charles Shuster?"

"That's me," said Mrs. Grinham; "but I ain't heard anything o' my relations for years."

"Madam, you are doubtless aware that your brother Charles had a considerable fortune."

"I knew as he made a lot o' money buying up dead hosses in the Crimean war; but he never troubled us much."

"Madam, he is, I am sorry to inform you, dead. He has died worth a large sum of money, and left it all to you to atone for his neglect of you while he was alive."

"What!"

Mrs. Grinham shrieked the word out. She fancied she was dreaming. A large sum of money! Why, she'd almost forgotten she had a brother, it was so long since she had heard anything about him.

The gentleman, who was a solicitor, and had been some time finding her out, gave her lengthy particulars of her fortune and of her brother's affairs, but she hardly caught a word he said, she was so bewildered.

Presently Mr. Grinham came slouching in with his screw of tobacco.

"Oh, Jem," shrieked his wife, "my brother Charles is dead, and he's left us a fortune!"

Mr. Grinham's clay pipe slipped out of his mouth and smashed itself on the floor. He sat down and took his hat off.

"A fortune!"

He repeated it three times slowly. Then he looked round the dirty back kitchen with a look of unutterable loathing.

"When can we have some of it to go on with?" he asked presently.

"My dear sir, if you will come to my office to-morrow

—here is my card—I will arrange everything to your satisfaction and immediate advantage."

The gentleman gave his card to Mr. Grinham, bowed, and went out.

For two minutes neither husband nor wife spoke, then the man gathered himself together and said, "Sarah, have you got fourpence? I must go and have a drink on the strength of this." And then his wife told him that she hadn't a penny in the place, and that reminded her that her son and heir, her boy Jemmy, heir to this big fortune, had gone out to pawn the flat-iron and hadn't come back again.

"I'm so uneasy about Jemmy," she said. "Where can he be?"

"A fortune!" answered her husband, thinking aloud.

But the mother's heart, in spite of the sudden windfall, was heavy. She had won a fortune and lost her child on the selfsame night.

* * * * *

The good ship Mayflower sailed from the East India Docks for Australia with a crew of forty men and eighty passengers.

That was according to the owner's books. But there was a passenger of whom the owners knew nothing. He hadn't booked his berth or engaged with the firm as a seaman, and the ship was out at sea before he was discovered.

Then a little white-faced London boy suddenly appeared on deck, to the amazement of everybody.

"Curse you, you young rascal! what the devil are you doing here?" said the captain.

"Please, sir," whimpered the boy, who had visions of being thrown overboard, "I wanted to go to sea and make my fortune, and I hid myself."

"Where the deuce are you going to make your fortune?"

"Out in them furrin' countries, sir, as we read about. Jack Smith made his that way, and I thought I might get a lot of gold in Californy and take back and make my father a gentleman, like he did his'n."

The passengers had gathered round to listen to the little stowaway's story, and, encouraged by the attention he had excited, he told them all.

He had read in "The Boy Sailor" of a golden land to which the great ships sailed, and in the last week's number Jack Smith, the hero, had gone out there and picked up enough gold to live happy ever after on, and he had thought if he could get there he would do the same. So he had hidden himself in the ship.

The boy was Master Jemmy Grinham, and he had four-pence and a pawn-ticket in his pocket with which to start in the new world.

No wonder Mrs. Grinham waited in vain for the return of the missing heir.

* * * * *

Five years have passed away since the good ship Mayflower sailed for Australia.

Mr. and Mrs. Grinham were quite gentlepeople now, and in their beautiful house in the suburbs received their neighbours hospitably, and were reckoned people worth cultivating. They gave good dinners and dances, and kept open house, and were always safe when subscriptions were wanted for local or general purposes.

They had grieved long and earnestly for their lost son. The mystery surrounding his fate had never been pierced, and at last they had made up their minds that an accident had happened to him, and that he would never be

heard of again. The mother felt her loss because she loved him dearly, and there was a void in her heart. The father grieved because now that he was wealthy he could afford the luxury of a son, and a son was something that a rich man ought to have if only to leave his money to when he died.

Jemmy was not mentioned in their new circle of acquaintances. The past life of the Grinham's was a profound secret. They came away from their old home without leaving anyone the means of tracing them, and gave it out to the Lisson-grovers that they were going to Australia. If it had been known they had only been poor working people, suburban society might have withstood even the temptation of the dinners and the parties.

One day a tall lad, bronzed with sun and sea, knocked at the door of the old house in Lisson-grove. He was a fine, strapping lad, well dressed and hearty, and no one would have recognised in him the white-faced, ragged little boy who sailed from the East India Docks five years ago.

But Jemmy Grinham it was, and now he was back to give his father and mother a glad surprise. He had been lucky. The captain had been very kind to him, and given him a help with a friend in Australia, and the friend had taken a fancy to him and found the lad useful. Jemmy had been grateful, and when the opportunity came had repaid his benefactor. A robbery was attempted at his employer's place, and the boy's courage and intrepidity had saved thousands of pounds' worth of property.

And now he was back again home with the little fortune for his father and mother that he had dreamed about. He had £300 which his master had given him for catching the thieves and saving the property. He was to go to England,

find his poor parents, bring them out, and their fortune should be made too. He had not written home while he had been away. It had always been his scheme to surprise his parents when the good luck came.

It was with a beating heart that he rapped at the door. Would his mother come herself? His eyes filled with tears as he thought of the little cry of joy she would give.

A strange woman answered him, and his voice trembled as he said—

“Is Mrs. Grinham in?”

“Nobody o’ that name here.”

“I beg your pardon,” stammered the lad, “I’ve been away five years. Can you tell me where she’s gone to?”

“Bill!” shouted the woman

Bill was up stairs evidently, for the voice came down in reply—

“Hullo!—what is it?”

“D’ye know where the Grinham be gone to as lived here five year ago?”

“Yes,” answered Bill; “they went to Australy.”

Poor Jem turned quite white under his tan, and he staggered back from the step.

He had come so many weary leagues to find them, and they were in Australia all the time.

He turned away to hide his tears, and, thanking the woman in a husky voice, walked down the old familiar street.

It was hard, after being buoyed with hope so long, to have success dashed from him just as he thought he held it in his grasp.

He walked away thinking of all that had happened since the afternoon he went to pawn his mother’s flat-iron, and

ran away with the money. He carried the ticket with him still.

He pulled out his purse and looked at the worn duplicate. It was the only memento he had of that eventful step in his career.

He had intended to fling his notes down in his mother's lap with the ticket and say, "Mother—that's what your flat-iron fetched."

And now—

He put the ticket back sorrowfully, and went aimlessly on his way through the London streets.

* * * * *

There was a grand evening party at Mr. Jones's, the stockbroker's, in Melina-terrace, Haverstock Hill.

Mr. Jones lived at one end of Melina-terrace, and the Grinham's at the other, and as the families were friendly the Grinham's were invited.

Mr. Jones was doing the thing in style, and an awning from the hall door to the front garden gate having well advertised the fact that a party was to be given, the usual crowd had assembled outside to witness the arrivals.

A young man with a sunburnt face, strolling along, came up to the crowd, and, having nothing better to do, joined it and watched the fast-arriving guests.

Presently he saw a lady and gentleman come along the terrace on foot, and pass into the house.

He gave such a sharp, sudden cry that the crowd turned round to look at him.

Before he could recover his composure the gentleman and lady had passed into the house, and the door was shut.

He had recognised the lady's face, and in that sudden revelation every other incident of the scene was blotted

out. He saw no jewels, no grand house, no well-dressed lady—only a well-known face.

Five years were rolled back suddenly, and all he thought of was a poor hard-working woman, who had sent her son to pawn a flat-iron.

He dashed through the crowd, ran up the steps, and banged at the door.

As it opened he flew past the astonished servant, and rushed into the brilliantly-lighted room.

He looked for one face only, and saw it. His mother was sitting by the hostess, talking to her.

Jemmy Grinham ran across the room, and in a moment had flung a packet in her lap.

“Mother,” he shouted, beside himself with excitement, “this is what they lent on your flat-iron!” Then he held up the pawn-ticket, and, almost hysterical with joy, smothered her face with kisses.

At the first sound of his voice Mrs. Grinham had almost swooned, but his hot kisses convinced her it was no ghost from the dead, but her dear boy, safe and sound, returned at last.

The guests gazed in astonishment at the scene. The mother had risen and clasped her son in a passionate embrace, and the notes and the pawn-ticket fell on the floor.

Mr. Jones picked the latter up and read it.

It was a ticket for a flat-iron dated five years back, and made out in the name of Sarah Grinham.

* * * * *

The story of the rich Mrs. Grinham, her long-lost son, and her flat-iron, went the round of Haverstock Hill society, and was the staple subject of conversation for a month.

But neither of the parties most interested cared much

about that. Mr. and Mrs. Grinham were too rich to be cut and their parties too good to be refused, and the story was "really so very romantic, you know."

When the excitement of the first meeting was over, and Mr. and Mrs. Grinham and Jemmy were beneath their own roof, there was a long tale to tell on both sides.

If his parents were astonished to see him, Jemmy was no less amazed at the change of fortune which had overtaken them.

"And to think," he said, "that all the time I was sailing across the sea to look for a fortune one had come to you ready made, at the very time I lay a ragged little stowaway in the *Mayflower*."

Jemmy is not going back to Australia. There is no necessity now. In spite of that awkward revelation of his, he is a great favourite in the suburb, for he is handsome, and he will, of course, be rich.

Mr. Jones still invites the Grinham family to visit him, for there is a grown-up Miss Jones, and Jemmy and she seem to suit each other very well.

Sarah Grinham has a little box of treasures which she keeps in her own little boudoir. There is a curl cut from Jemmy's hair when he was a baby, her marriage certificate, one or two little remnants of the old life of poverty, and a photograph of herself and Mr. Grinham, taken for sixpence on Hampstead Heath, when they were not dressed quite so fashionably as they are now. She has lately added to that little store another memento of the old life. It is something linked with a story of a lost son and the strange journey he made in search of fortune. It is something which will always remind her of the sad day he was lost and the happy night she saw him again after five long years. It is the pawnbroker's ticket for—a flat-iron.

PLEDGE XIV

A “SHAKESPEARE.”

IN an untidy corner of a pawnbroker's widow, where umbrellas, meerschaum pipes, surgical instruments, cruet-stands, books, and old china, lie in unpicturesque confusion to tempt the buyer, there is also a beautifully-bound copy of Shakespeare's works.

Adversity makes strange bedfellows, and it is adversity which has brought William Shakespeare to lie here cheek by jowl with a varied assortment of unredeemed pledges.

The shopman has been reaching something from the window to show a customer, and in drawing it out his hand has caught the handsome volume and flung it open at the title-page. There is an inscription written there which it is now open for the passer-by to read: “To William Durtnall. A prize for diligence and general good conduct. June, 18—.” Then follows the name of the country school where William Durtnall had been so diligent and so good.

It is a sad satire upon such a character that the prize should come to lie among the unredeemed pledges of a pawnbroker's stock. What brought it from the country to the great city? How came the good and diligent William to use it as security for an advance, and why was it never redeemed?

Listen to the story of William Durtnall's life.

* * * * *

It is William Durtnall's last night at home.

He is about to leave the quiet village of Ottermouth, where his young life has been passed, and go up to London to make his fortune.

William is just sixteen, a bright, rosy-cheeked, country lad, the sole joy and comfort of his widowed and invalid mother. Ever since Willie can remember they have lived in the modest little cottage where he sits to-night toying with his simple supper—delighted to think that he is about to embark in life, grieved to think that he must part from her whom he loves and reverences, from whose side he has never yet been absent many hours.

He knows that he shall miss her very much, and that where he is going there will be no one to watch over him and make his life pleasant as she has done ; he knows that the parting will almost break her heart, and that in the long, lonely evenings she will sit and weep as she looks upon his empty chair.

But it is necessary that he should make a future for himself, and the chance has come. His mother stands aside, and refuses to be a bar to her son's success ; he feels that in securing a position he will be benefiting her, and so it is finally arranged that he shall accept the situation offered him, and go to London.

This splendid situation has not been lightly obtained. Willie had been the favourite pupil at the local school. He has been patted on the head by the rector, and held up as a bright example by all the local patrons of learning. Willie has fully deserved their favour. He has been the best boy at the school, has shown himself wonderfully quick at figures, and has gained the annual prize for diligence and good conduct.

This prize was a beautifully-bound copy of Shakespeare's

works, and when Willie, beaming with pleasure, brought it home to his mother, the foolish woman let two big tears of pride and joy fall right upon the fly-leaf where her son's name was honourably mentioned in the head master's very best and most flourishing handwriting.

That was the termination of Willie's scholastic career. He went to business then, for his mother was very poor, having only a trifling allowance made to her for her life by her dead husband's employer, a local solicitor.

Mr. Durtnall had been a solicitor's clerk, not very quick, but very honest and faithful. When he died, at the age of forty-five, his salary was £2 a week. He left his wife and child penniless, but in consideration of his long and faithful services his employer made an allowance to his widow of £1 a week as long as she lived.

It is true that at that time she wasn't expected to live a fortnight, but of course that had nothing to do with Lawyer Jones's munificence finding its way into the local paper.

Widow Durtnall got well unexpectedly, and Lawyer Jones perhaps regretted he had been in such a hurry to let his benevolence be publicly announced. Still, there it was, and he couldn't go back, so Mrs. Durtnall had his pound a week and lived on it.

When Willie left school he got a place at the local draper's as a sort of errand boy and junior shopman combined. But the trade wasn't heavy, and the year being a bad one, Willie, after giving every satisfaction for six months, got a week's notice.

Then it was that the brilliant opening presented itself. An influential resident, a retired draper from Exeter, who had taken great interest in Willie's scholastic career, offered to get him into the great London house of Solomon Smith

and Co. Solomon Smith and Co. were world-famed wholesale drapers. Even Willie and his mother had heard of them.

“Of course, you’ll have to work hard at first there, my boy,” said his patron, “and work your way up. But it’s a splendid house. Why, there are men in the firm now getting their thousand a year who went in as lads at next to nothing.”

The more Willie heard about the great house of Solomon Smith the more it seemed to him the stepping-stone to fortune. Drapery house—nonsense! It was a cave of jewels to which with a magic “open sesame” he would obtain admission like a second Aladdin, and secure a fortune by just picking it up.

And fancy, when he was having a thousand a year, what a beautiful home he would make for his mother! She should always sit in the drawing-room with cherry ribbons to her caps, and be a real lady. And perhaps the partners would look round and spend the evening with them. He was sure Mr. Smith would like his mother, and if he once tasted her rhubarb jam—ah!

Talking over his brilliant prospects it suddenly occurred to Willie that perhaps a preliminary pot of the rhubarb jam might be diplomatically useful. Mrs. Durtm~~all~~ had the same idea as her son, and so this evening, as he sits at supper for the last time at home, there lies up stairs in his box a pot of the famous home-made jam in dangerous proximity to the prize “Shakespeare.”

Ere mother and son sought their beds that night they knelt together in the little room, and with choked voices prayed together to the Throne of Grace—the mother that her son’s future might be peaceful and prosperous, the

son that God would console the widow shorn of her only joy.

And the next morning they parted at Exeter Station, he a rosy-cheeked, merry country lad, beaming with rude health and elated with hope; she a frail woman, lonely and broken-hearted, and penetrated already by the fatal shaft of that disease which was soon to free Lawyer Jones from the penalty of his rash promise.

* * * * *

Messrs. Solomon Smith and Co. are world-famed as wholesale drapers. Their gigantic establishment occupies a whole block of buildings in a great City thoroughfare, and their *employes* number many hundreds. Their transactions are colossal, and their wealth is enormous. They bear a character which is irreproachable, and their benevolence is universally admitted.

The senior partner is greatly revered for the active part he takes in all measures for the benefit of the heathen.

Like all wholesale drapery houses, the system of business is of the strictest and most methodical kind. The huge army of *employes* is officered by martinets, and the heads of the firm invariably leave the details of such a gigantic concern to be arranged upon the most approved business principles.

The partners in such a concern rarely interfere personally with the management of departments. It is to the counting-house that they confine their attentions, and many of them are ignorant of the gross cruelty which the working of the wholesale drapery system entails.

A year has passed since Willie Durtnall came to take his place as a servant of the great firm.

Let us see how he is getting on. We search for him in

vain through room after room. We must go down very low to find him.

We have come to a huge cavernous building which might appropriately be described as a cellar.

It is mid-day, and the sun is shining brightly outside, but forty gas-jets are flaring, for here no light can penetrate.

We are confused at first by the glare of the light and the babel of tongues rattling off item after item. Seated at rows of desks are some thirty or forty youths, ranging in age from fourteen to eighteen.

Willie Durtnall we remember a rosy-cheeked, stalwart lad. Surely he cannot be here. These young fellows are all pale and bent, and their cheeks are thin and hollow. There is no Willie Durtnall, no healthy, happy, country lad here.

Stay, that tall, white-faced boy shading his eyes with his hands bears some resemblance to him. He looks up.

It is he—but, O, what a change !

The lad is a wreck—his roses have gone, and his face is deadly pale. As he looks up we see that he winks and blinks like an owl, and presently he bursts out into a distressing cough that tells tales about his lungs.

Here comes a customer who has business in this room. He is Willie's old master from Ottermouth. He has asked for the lad, and Willie has been pointed out to him.

The draper stares in astonishment.

“ You look ill, lad,” he says kindly.

“ I have been,” answers the boy feebly, “ but I'm getting better.”

“ What's been the matter ? ”

“ Well, I got a bad cold, and I seemed to go wrong all

of a sudden. I expect London didn't agree with me at first. I'm used to the fresh air, and this place—”

The draper looks round and shrugs his shoulders.

“Why, it's like the Black Hole in Calcutta,” he says.

“I don't know what that was like,” answers the lad, under his breath, as though he were afraid to be heard, “but this place settles no end of fellows.”

“You aren't in it long, I suppose?”

“We are often in it from eight in the morning till eleven o'clock at night, with only half an hour for dinner and a quarter of an hour for tea.”

“Ah, but that isn't often?”

“It's six weeks at a stretch.”

“That's very dreadful.”

“But that's not the worst, sir. Look at these little lads at the next desk. They're apprentices, and just fresh from school. They worked at the desk till two o'clock this morning with the rest of us, and at six o'clock the watchman came round and pulled us out of bed to begin again, for this is our busy season.

Here the conversation is interrupted, and the lad has to go on with his work, figuring with lightning rapidity, and filling in invoice after invoice so fast that they seemed to fly from under his hand as if thrown out by machinery.

They work at high pressure in these great drapery houses, and they insist upon perfection. One mistake made by a lad of sixteen, working in a sea of figures fourteen and fifteen and sometimes twenty hours a day, is lightly punished, but the second means loss of promotion and often dismissal at a moment's notice.

In the worst days of American slavery never was there such nigger-driving as that practised systematically by the

wholesale drapery trade, and most cruelly practised towards those least able to bear its rigours—growing and delicate lads.

* * * * *

It is the day before the Christmas holidays, and the great firm of Solomon Smith and Co. is going to close for three days.

Just before two o'clock, when the shutters are to go up, Willie Durtnall falls from his seat in a dead faint.

He has been trembling and shivering all the morning ; his eyes, weakened by the daily gas, are protected by spectacles, and to-day the figures have swum before him. He has been queer and out of sorts all the week.

The lad who worked next him died a fortnight since in the house. He had been ill for a month, and the doctor said it was galloping consumption. He got delirious at last, and raved of his home and his mother ; and Willie, who had gone to see him after business hours up stairs in the great dormitory, had been shocked and unnerved.

He was in a very weak state himself, and he feared that his sight was going, and then ——. Well, it meant ruin. It meant that he would be a helpless burden on his poor mother all his life.

His last letter from her told him that she was ill, and pining to see her dear boy. How was he getting on ? Was he a favourite with the partners ?

Poor mother ! The boy had hesitated to dispel her illusion as his own had been dispelled.

But her letter added a fresh terror to those which were already weighing him down. His health he knew was breaking down.

He was going home at Christmas. He had saved his

money for months to pay the fare, but the pleasure of the visit was marred by the fear he had that his mother would see how ill he was.

He was, indeed, only a wreck. Everyone in his department saw that he was going the way so many a bright young lad had gone. All constitutions will not stand the long hours of fierce brain work in a vile atmosphere. The town lads get on pretty well. It is the country boys, accustomed to fresh air and exercise and regular meals, who break most rapidly, and leave or die.

Willie would not leave. He was not fit to take another situation even could he have got one. But when he fainted the manager was in the room. He had long noticed the lad's condition, and he really felt sorry for him. It was his duty, if he saw a lad was likely to fall ill and be unable to work, to dismiss him at once.

Besides, he felt sure that Willie was not only going to be ill, but that his eyesight was failing.

When the lad had recovered he told him to go to the counting-house.

There he received a week's salary, with an intimation that his services would not be required any more. This was exceptional generosity. The firm claims the right to dismiss at a minute's notice without any salary at all.

There is nothing cruel or inhuman in this procedure—it is merely the wholesale drapery system. Flesh and blood is only a marketable commodity—if you allow nonsensical ideas about humanity, and all that sort of thing, to get into the drapery system, you would upset it, and why upset a system which works so admirably—for the employers.

Willie's dismissal was a terrible blow. Packing his little box, putting his prize for diligence and good conduct care-

fully in with his clothes, he bade his comrades a sorrowful good-bye and reeled out of the place.

There was one of the young men who lived out of doors who had taken a fancy to Willie and done him many little kindnesses. He saw the lad's condition, and knew that he was totally unfit to travel. He insisted upon his coming home and spending Christmas with him. "You'll have a longer holiday than you thought, my boy," he said kindly.

"You'll be better for a few days' rest, and then you can go down home.

Willie Durtnall was forced to yield to his friend's suggestion. He felt so ill and weak that he could hardly stand.

* * * * *

For four weeks the cast-off clerk of Solomon Smith and Co. lay between life and death at the house of the friend who had taken him in.

They wrote his mother a few days after Christmas that her son was lying at death's door, delirious and calling for her, and suggested that she should come.

The letter was opened and answered by Lawyer Jones, who replied that Mrs. Durtnall could not come to London, she having set out on a very much longer journey rather suddenly on the previous day.

Mrs. Durtnall was dead.

Lawyer Jones took possession of her furniture and her few effects, and they were sold to defray the expenses of her funeral and to settle some small bills unpaid at the time of her death.

They broke the news gently to the poor lad when with returning consciousness he asked for news of his mother, and when Willie Durtnall lifted his weak limbs from the bed

of sickness he was shattered in health, penniless, friendless, and alone.

His little stock of money had been exhausted for medical attendance, for his friend had a large heart but a small purse, and in justice to his own family he could not pay the expenses of a comparative stranger.

When Willie could walk he insisted upon being a burden to his kind friend no longer. He took his small box, and hired a top attic in a little side street until such time as he could get into collar again.

With the five shillings his friend insisted upon making him keep he managed for a few days. He wandered from office to office seeking work, but everywhere his appearance was against him. He was a youth risen from the grave, and he looked it.

When his last shilling was gone he pawned his clothes, and when he had only the clothes he stood upright in he pawned his little treasures. Then it was that the "good and diligent boy," with an aching heart, took the reward of his diligence under his arm and pawned it for a meal and a lodging.

It was with a feeling of shame and humiliation that he put it down upon the counter, and he cast his eyes on the ground as the pawnbroker's assistant opened it at the fly-leaf.

He remembered how two years ago he had stood a bright, rosy-cheeked boy, glowing with health, to receive this book from the hands of his master amid the plaudits of his companions.

He remembered how he had rushed home with it to his mother, and how she had prophesied it was his first step upon the path to fame and fortune.

He remembered, too, how carefully it had been put in his box when he came up to the great city to take his place in the warehouse of Messrs. Solomon Smith and Co., and how he had made sure that, once in the employ of that famous firm, he had only to be good and diligent and he would win a far more substantial prize than a volume of "Shakespeare."

He took what the shopman offered him on his prize, and, hungry as he was, he hardly liked to spend it. It seemed to him that the few shillings were the price of his past and of his future—that he had parted with the last tie that bound him to hope.

Still he kept plodding the weary round of the City offices, and living as best he could, till at last he got too shabby to apply for a clerk's berth.

When he was out at heel and ragged he asked for a porter's place, and they looked at his white face and thin, bent body, and laughed.

After a time he sank lower and lower, and tramped the streets all night unable to afford a lodging. He picked up what he could, and got odd jobs in the streets.

One day, inspired with a sudden fury at the cruelty of his fate, he felt a hideous temptation to rebel against society in revenge—to become a thief if he saw the chance.

A lady passed him one day when hunger was gnawing his vitals and the cold was cutting him through.

Her purse was in one of those back pockets specially designed to instil into the uncultured mind the maxim that God helps those who help themselves.

He could have seized it unseen. There it lay, so close to his hand, as she stopped to look into a shop window, that his fingers had but to close and it was his.

With a violent effort he tore himself away, and rushed along the street out of the way of the terrible temptation. And that night he reaped the reward of his honesty by failing to earn a night's shelter, and having to take to the casual ward at last.

After that no one who knew him ever saw him again.

What became of him? Ah, Heaven knows.

What does become of the poor outcasts who are dragged down by cruel circumstances from respectability to misery and ruin?

They are drawn into some mysterious vortex, and whirled away to be seen no more.

Whether he died or lived, whether at last he found a haven or drifted into the black ocean of crime, I cannot say. He never redeemed his "Shakespeare," for it lies even now as I write in the pawnbroker's window, its open page telling all who pass by that once the poor wretch who pawned it was "good and diligent."

But it is a dumb witness to no more. It does not tell the curious gazer that this lad reaped the reward of his diligence by getting promoted to the famous house of Solomon Smith and Co., wholesale drapers, and there his health was ruined and his whole life marred, which result being brought about, he was flung away as you fling away an orange from which you have squeezed the juice.

* * * * *

I have told here the simple story of a young lad's life. The incidents happen every day. There are twenty wholesale houses where the system here described prevails. The heads of the firm are in many instances, I believe, ignorant of the terrible amount of overwork and overstrain to which their younger *employes* are subjected. Many of

these “slave-owners” are most charitable men, and Solomon Smith himself is chairman of the Society for Promoting Early Closing among the Hottentots. We have an Act which protects the factory workers, and we have vigorously attacked the petty masters of “sweating shops.” But there flourish in our midst colossal concerns, owned by merchant princes, which employ boy labour under the most cruel circumstances.

In some of these houses the lads have barely time to swallow their meals, they sleep twenty in a small room, and have often to work in an underground cellar from half-past eight in the morning till past eleven at night, sometimes from six in the morning till two the next morning, for days in succession. And during the “busy times” not one penny extra is allowed in the shape of salary to these white niggers.

If the story of poor Willie Durnall’s famous prize shall arouse the attention of one earnest philanthropist to this crying evil I shall not have written it in vain. I plead on behalf of thousands of young lads whose lives are being ruined by this cruel system. In these days of widespread humanity and benevolent legislation the law must no longer hesitate to bring under its control the great white slave shops of the City.

PLEDGE XV

A CORAL AND BELLS.

“ I SAY, that young ‘un’s clever.”

“ Ain’t she? Don’t you know who she is?”

“ No. She’s down on the bills as ‘ Little Daisy.’ ”

“ Yes; but she’s Daisy Vavasour’s little girl.”

“ Go on!”

“ Honour! I saw Gerty Holmes bring her to rehearsal.”

“ Well, I am glad. If she turns out right it’ll be a fine thing for Gerty. She deserves it, too, poor girl, I’m blest if she doesn’t.”

The above conversation took place at the wings of the Royal Frivolity Theatre one bleak March afternoon during the rehearsal of the new burlesque which was to set the Thames on fire. The speakers were two young ladies of the chorus, but they wore elegant sealskin mantles, and were attired in the height of fashion.

I need go into no details if I explain that the new burlesque at the Frivolity was one of those pieces specially arranged as a vehicle for the lavish display of female charms, and that, talent being a minor consideration in certain *roles*, the daughters of Bohemia, who were on the best of terms with the sons of Belgravia, found on the boards amusement for the passing hour, and that professional status which enables a young lady in trouble with her landlady or her coachman to describe herself before a legal tribunal as “ an actress.”

The two young ladies were conversing about a little girl of five, who was cast for a part in this burlesque.

She was a sweet little thing, with large, saucy blue eyes, a laughing mouth, and a quaint delivery that made every word she uttered of value.

When she spoke her first lines clearly and distinctly, and brought her little foot down with a stamp, in obedience to the author's direction, there was quite a murmur among the company, and people began to ask who she was.

And when the whisper ran round that this infant phenomenon was Daisy Vavasour's little girl, and that Gerty Holmes had taught her to act and brought her to the theatre, there was quite a rush to look at the child. She was patted on the head by the gentlemen, kissed by the ladies, complimented by the stage manager, and blessed by everybody but the author, who foresaw another request to alter his burlesque for the twenty-fifth time in order on this occasion to strengthen the part of Little Daisy.

That the reader may fully understand the intense interest excited by this baby actress, we must go back three years.

* * * * *

Daisy Vavasour and Gerty Holmes were two of the merriest, flightiest girls of the Royal Frivolity company.

Daisy was five-and-twenty and Gerty was two years her junior, and they were both idolised by the Crutch and Toothpick Brigade, for, in the expressive language of the fraternity, both the girls were "good for a lark." No Richmond dinner, no supper party, in a certain set, was complete without Gerty and Daisy.

They were only "show girls"—that is, they came on with the bevy of fair damsels, and their salaries were some-

where about two guineas a week, but outside the theatre their position was aristocratic. Daisy had charming apartments at Pimlico, and Gerty's rooms in Brunswick-cottages, St. John's Wood, were furnished in the most elegant and *recherche* style.

To save themselves the trouble of worrying their pretty little heads with financial matters, they allowed a gentleman to be their purse-bearer, and to settle their worldly affairs for them.

Occasionally there was a change of ministry, and the Financial Secretary to the Home Department would resign, to be succeeded by another.

Three years ago, when Gerty and Daisy were in the height of their prosperity, and the world of fashion was at their feet, Daisy's Chancellor of the Exchequer was a young baronet of sporting proclivities, and Gerty was at the moment without one at all, having been attacked by one of those *affaires de cœur* which sometimes will happen in the best-regulated female breast. Gerty had fallen over head and ears in love with the gentleman who played the lovers at the *Frivolity*. She was going to give up Richmond dinners and West-end suppers, and wear black, and go to church, and by-and-by, perhaps, Augustus would marry her, and then they would settle down in a cottage, have babies, buy a perambulator, and propitiate Mrs. Grundy in every possible way.

This was Gerty's dream, but when she told it to Daisy in the crowded dressing-room Daisy shrieked with laughter, and, kicking up her heels, indulged in a wild war dance, much to the disgust of the other ladies, who were "joggled," and dabbed the rouge on the ends of their noses instead of on to their cheeks.

But afterwards, as they went up stairs on to the stage dressed, or rather undressed, for their parts, Daisy said quietly—

“Gerty, do you think you should like children?”

“Oh yes,” said Gerty; “I know I should.”

“Come over to my place to-morrow; you’ve never been. Come and see my little one. I’ve had it home.”

Gerty was delighted, and promised that she would. She had often heard of Daisy Vavasour’s two-year-old little girl who was out at nurse, but had never seen it.

The next day Gerty went over to her friend at Pimlico, and she enjoyed herself more than she had for many a long day.

The two girls forgot the footlights, the bold life of bare limbs and painted faces, and all the heartless frivolity of the fast circle they moved in.

They were two happy girls, with a baby between them. They sat all day in Daisy’s pretty drawing-room, and talked over baby’s future, and then they had a game of romps with her, and then they went out to the shop and bought things for baby, and came back again to a nice quiet tea-dinner, and baby was put upon a high chair and nearly choked between them.

Before they went to the theatre Daisy showed her visitor a beautiful coral and silver bells, which she whispered mysteriously was the gift of “baby’s father.”

Gerty wasn’t inquisitive, and didn’t ask too much, but Daisy told her that “he” wasn’t friends with her now, and that she hadn’t seen him for a long time. We all have our family secrets, and Daisy Vavasour had hers.

The friendship between the girls ripened over baby. Baby was a link between them, and many and many a day

would Gerty Holmes go over to Daisy's house to have a quiet hour with her and the little one.

I think they were both better for the domestic interest imported into their Bohemian lives ; and though they laughed as loudly still, and were as pert and bold as ever, the womanly instinct aroused had not been without its good effect.

One day Daisy didn't come to the theatre, sending a note to say she was ill. The next day Gerty went round and found her in bed. The doctor was there when she called, and presently he explained to her why she had better not see the patient.

The explanation was clear. Daisy Vavasour's symptoms were those of small-pox.

Gerty would not listen to the doctor. Somebody would have to nurse her friend ; it shouldn't be a stranger to her poor girl.

The doctor told Gerty if she insisted she would have to isolate herself—she certainly couldn't go in and out of the house.

Gerty, in her hearty, impulsive way, decided at once. She sent word to the theatre that she couldn't come any more, and then she sat down to nurse her friend.

The child was to be kept down stairs out of the way by the landlady, and visitors were to be forbidden the house.

Over Gerty's moral character angels and the respectable classes would weep ; as to reputation she hadn't a rag, except the reputation of being as fast a little lady as the Frivolity could boast ; but she sat down by the bedside of her friend to undertake a task and run a risk from which the loftiest virtue might well have shrunk with horror.

For a fortnight she never left her friend. There were gay parties at Richmond and glorious supper parties in town; there was everything to entice the butterfly whose life is made up of sunshine and gay flowers, but none of these tempted Gerty. She nursed her sick friend with untiring devotion, giving up all for the troubles and cares of a lonely sick room.

The case was a bad one. Towards the end Daisy grew delirious, and raved of the old days. She talked of her home in the country, where her old father lived still—an honest yokel, who had cursed the name of London, that had robbed him of his pretty child.

The old days of innocence came back, mixed with the unholy revels of the girl's later life. Now she babbled of hay-fields and sweet flowers, and now of the wild life behind the lights.

She sang snatches from the songs in the burlesques; and the names of the men who had paid court to her came now and then to her fevered lips.

And amid it all, mixed up with every phase of her life, as it were, was the little child—her little Daisy.

Daisy was with her in the green fields; Daisy was with her as she tried on the amazonian armour in the "Kingdom of Delight"; Daisy was on her knee as the Baronet clasped a diamond necklace round her throat.

Just before the end came consciousness returned, and Daisy Vavasour, of the *Frivolity Theatre*, thin and hollow-cheeked, and dying, clasped the hand of the little chorus girl who had been her friend when all others flew from her, and bade God bless her for all she had done.

Her last request to Gerty was about the child.

"Promise me, Gerty, if I die, you will be a mother to my

poor little one. Oh, Gerty, if I had my time over again I would be so different."

Gerty promised to take little Daisy, and that while she lived she should never come to any harm. Then, her voice choked with sobs, and the tears raining down on the still white face of the dying woman, she bent over her and kissed her.

And that kiss was the last thing on earth that Daisy ever knew. That night the curtain rang down upon her life's short burlesque, the paint and the powder were washed from her face, the gay trappings of this mimic scene were stripped from her limbs, and she went home.

Gerty Holmes paid a terrible price for that kiss. She sickened, and was taken with the disease herself, and came out again into the world with a face seamed almost beyond recognition, and a baby to keep—her dear friend's little Daisy.

Poor Gerty was heavily handicapped. They didn't want her any more for the beauty show at the *Frivolity*. No amount of powder would cover those awful marks, and presents were hardly likely to rain upon her now from the Crutch and Toothpick Brigade.

Augustus, it is needless to say, took care at once to convince her that all hopes in that quarter were at an end. "Poor little devil!" he said to the gentleman who dressed in the same room with him, "she was spoony on me once; but, dem it all, you know, it won't do, will it?"

His friend thought not, especially now no young gentleman who played the lovers was eminent in his profession unless he had at least three ladies of title leaving bouquets at the stage door for him nightly.

So Gerty dropped quite out of her old set, gave up her

handsome rooms and the old life, and settled down with the remains of her prosperity to hide her poor scarred face, work her little fingers to the bone, and be a mother to her dead friend's little child.

It was a hard struggle, for Gerty had lived a life of sunshine too long to be ready for the storm.

She tried lots of things, and failed in all. She was beaten everywhere by women who had been brought up to be useful.

It was to make up the rent after a very bad time that Daisy's coral and bells went over to the poor man's friend.

Gerty took it over herself, and it was lucky she did. It was the pawnbroker himself who lent her the sovereign she asked, and he questioned her.

Where did she get it? Was it hers? How long had she had it?

Gerty wondered at his curiosity, but the pawnbroker explained. It was of him that it had been bought some years ago, and the gentleman who bought it was very well known to him.

“It was Sir —,” said the pawnbroker, “and I noticed the circumstance because it was a theatrical young lady who was with him, I was told, and I wondered what a young swell and a ballet girl wanted with a coral and bells.”

To the mind unacquainted with the nice distinctions of theatrical rank, all young ladies on the stage who are not actresses are ballet girls.

Gerty knew in a minute who the young lady referred to was, and as she left the shop with the money she felt that she had discovered the secret which Daisy had never told her.

That night, nerved by the prospect of approaching want—

want which she dreaded not for herself, but for the little one who was all in the world to her now—Gerty sat down and scrawled a note in her best hand to the Baronet.

It was an awkward, illiterate note, but inoffensively worded, and it told its story.

It was three days before she could find out the address. When she got it, she posted her letter, and waited.

She waited a week, and a very anxious week it was.

The little work Gerty had been able to get was done, and the money spent, and she could get no more.

One evening when she was wondering what she could sell next, she sat with Daisy in her arms in the little top room where they lived.

On the wall was a piece of cracked looking-glass, and as Gerty rocked the little one to sleep on her knee her eyes were fixed intently on the face the glass reflected.

It was in the twilight, and all was quiet and still. Gerty's thoughts wandered far away. She remembered the old days when her face was her fortune, when the curled darlings of Belgravia were at her feet, when the best of everything was at her command, and Fortunatus flung his purse into her lap.

All the evil of those old days rose up before her now—all the waste of her bright youth and the beauty God had given her. But for the child she would be glad if it was all over, now that there was no temptation to go the devil's pace, and use life up so fiercely.

She looked at her face, and wondered how she should have fared had God spared her beauty—whether for the child's sake she would have lived a better life.

Lost in her reverie, she did not hear a knock at the door.

The person knocking receiving no answer opened the

door and entered, and Gerty turned round to find herself in the presence of a tall, handsome gentleman of about five-and-thirty.

“I beg your pardon,” said the stranger, stroking his moustache, and looking rather sheepishly at the child in Gerty’s arms; “but are you Miss Holmes?”

“Yes,” said Gerty, astonished.

“Haw! You—ahaw—wrote me a letter?”

Gerty knew who her visitor was now.

“I thought I’d come myself,” said the Baronet, “it’s such a doosid rum affair. Poor Daisy; she wasn’t a bad sort!”

The Baronet flicked his boots with his cane, and waited for Gerty to say something. He felt ill at ease. The little one disconcerted him dreadfully.

Gerty told her story shortly and simply—how her dead friend had left the child in her charge, and how she had found out that once the Baronet had been good to her—and to the child.

Gerty was too shrewd a little woman of the world to speak more plainly. She put the whole case as a question of friendship and generosity.

The Baronet heard her story, twirled his moustache, said “By Jove!” and looked everywhere but at the little one.

Perhaps he was afraid he might grow fond of it. Perhaps he had a wild idea that it might wake up and run at him, calling out “Daddy,” and then, by Jove! you know, it would have been doosid unpleasant.

He had liked Daisy very well when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he had been good to the child. When the inevitable coldness and quarrel came and another Chancellor reigned in his stead, he had given Daisy a cheque for three figures to buy the baby something, and had sought

fresh fields and pastures new for the sowing of his wild oats.

But now he heard Daisy was dead and the little one was being kept by a brave girl who was starving herself for its sake, he felt touched.

“Poor little devil!” he said to himself; “dash me, if I don’t behave handsomely to it!” Then turning to Gerty, he blurted out—

“I’m glad you sent for me, Miss Holmes, though it’s a doosid rum affair. I liked Daisy Vavasour, for she was a real good sort, and always ran straight. Look here, now. I’m doosid hard up, for I’ve been hit over the Guineas, but here’s a pony for the young ’un, and directly I get a bit straight I’ll send you some more. It shall never want a friend while I’ve a shot in the locker.”

Gerty took the notes, and felt that she had at last found a protector for poor Daisy’s little one, and that, though she might have to struggle still, the child would never want.

The Baronet went down stairs and out of the door, and beamed at himself all the way up the dirty little street. He had led the idle, thoughtless life of his class, and now he felt just as if he had been to church, and come out quite a pattern to the saints.

He kept his word for six months, and when he backed a horse he always put on “an extra fiver for the young ’un.”

He sent the money in his easy-going, slapdash way, without the slightest inquiry into Gerty Holmes’s character; but she made a good use of it, and when the Baronet broke his neck riding his own horse at an Irish steeplechase a few months later Gerty had a nice little sum put by for Daisy’s baby—a sum which she refused to benefit by in any way herself.

It was Gerty who discovered the little one's aptitude for mimicry, and taught her to act at first for amusement, but afterwards, when the undoubted talent was so plainly shown, as a business speculation.

No wonder at the Royal Frivolity, the scene of Daisy Vavasour's short life *can-can*, the performance of Gerty Holmes's *protegee* excited the attention and sympathy of the company.

It was only lately that the true story of the little chorus girl's heroic self-sacrifice had become known, and when she came to fetch little Daisy after rehearsal, and was recognised by her poor seamed face, many were the hands stretched out to grasp hers, and to tell her that now the little one would repay her for all her love and self-denial.

The coral and bells was long ago redeemed, and Gerty keeps it carefully. She will give it to Daisy some day when the child is old enough to understand its story and to know that it is a memento of her strange parentage—of the sporting baronet who broke his neck and of pretty Daisy Vavasour of the Royal Frivolity Theatre.

PLEDGE XVI.

A MUSICAL BOX.

FOR three days in succession the same advertisement appeared in a halfpenny evening paper:—

A WIDOW lady in difficulties wishes to dispose of the duplicates of several articles of jewellery and a musical box. Apply to R. E. D.

Young Mr. Simpkins, of the firm of Simpkins and Co., solicitors, Lincoln's Inn, read the announcement each evening, and on the third one of those mysterious impulses which move us at times, and for which we are quite unable to account, moved him to write to R. E. D. for particulars.

The particulars came by return of post. The jewellery consisted of an emerald ring, a gold locket, and a gold watch, and the musical box was a valuable one, and played twelve tunes. If Mr. Simpkins wished for an interview, R. E. D. would be at home that day from five till seven, and would be happy to see him.

“I believe these advertisements are swindles,” said Charley Simpkins to himself; “but I'll just follow this affair out and see.”

That afternoon, when he had finished work at the office, he took a hansom and went to the address given.

He found R. E. D. a melancholy-looking widow of five-and-thirty, a lady in her manners, evidently perfectly honest, very poor, and one who had had a great deal of trouble.

The upshot of the interview was that the young solicitor bought the duplicates of the property which had been in

pawn for very nearly a twelvemonth for a small sum, and left perfectly satisfied that he had been a party to a thoroughly legitimate transaction.

The widow lady, Mrs. Dashwood, explained to him that her husband, lately dead, had left her in very poor circumstances ; that after his death she had found these tickets in a drawer ; and that not having the means of redeeming them, she had advertised them for sale. She had fancied she might get a larger sum for them than Mr. Simpkins had offered, but not being a woman of business she had forgotten that of course the twelvemonth's interest on them considerably reduced their value.

The next day Mr. Simpkins redeemed his property. He found the jewellery to be fairly good, of the ordinary pattern, and not a particularly great bargain, but the musical box was a capital one, and he was delighted with it.

Of course, he wound it up and tried it at once directly he got it home.

It played “Home, sweet Home” first, then “Annie Laurie,” and then Mr. Simpkins’s smile of satisfaction faded from his face, and an indescribable look of doubt and astonishment took its place.

Then the musical box played “The Last Rose of Summer,” and the look deepened into one of uneasiness.

Before the tune was finished, young Mr. Simpkins exclaimed aloud, “The next tune will be, ‘I’m leaving thee in sorrow, Annie.’”

“The Last Rose” was finished, and Mr Simpkins, with an air of earnest attention, bent eagerly over the box. He could hear his own heart beat as the preliminary notes of the next tune were gurgled out.

It was “I’m leaving thee in sorrow, Annie,” sure enough !

And the next will be, "Pretty Jemima, don't say no," shouted young Mr. Simpkins, rushing to the box and eagerly scanning the lid for the list of tunes printed inside it.

Mr. Simpkins was right. He shut the box with a bang, dropped into his easy-chair, thrust his hands deeply into his trousers pockets, and exclaimed, "Well, I'm dashed if this isn't a rum go!"

It was indeed a "rum go." To understand how "rum" and why young Mr. Simpkins was so visibly affected, it is necessary to roll back the flight of time the short space of one year.

About twelve months before young Mr. Simpkins was attracted by R. E. D.'s advertisement he was passing through a quiet square in the north-west of London shortly after midnight.

He had been to the theatre, and had started to come home in a hansom cab; but it was November, and about the Novemberest fog within the memory of living man had settled down upon the metropolis; and after driving round this square five times, and failing to find an outlet, the cab-man had suggested that his fare would get home quicker if he got out and walked.

In this opinion the fare coincided, and this was the reason that at a quarter after midnight he was holding on to the railings of Blank-square, and wondering whether he had better stay where he was till the morning, or rush into the unknown dangers of the space beyond. It was while he was turning the position over in his mind, and striking vesuvian after vesuvian in the vain hope that by their light he might discover some point to which he could steer, that strange music stole across the air.

He knew he was in a square because of the railings ; he knew there were houses all round as a matter of course ; but he could see no lights in the windows, nor could he distinguish the faintest outline of architecture. The fog was too thick for that.

It was evidently from one of the houses that the music proceeded.

It was very faint and light, and he guessed it was a musical box. He could catch the sound distinctly, for all traffic was stopped, and there was nothing to disturb the dense stillness.

First the box played "Home, sweet Home," then "Annie Laurie," then "The Last Rose of Summer," then "I'm leaving thee in sorrow, Annie," and then "Pretty Jemima, don't say no." And it was just at the end of the fifth tune that the belated wayfarer heard a sharp shriek that curdled his blood.

It was the shriek of a woman, and it seemed to come from the same direction as the musical box. Then all was still, and Mr. Simpkins, terrified at the idea that perhaps evildoers were abroad and no policeman could be called, listened eagerly for a repetition of the noise.

It never came, but presently he heard the sound of a front door pulled to sharply, and then his ears told him that someone was hurrying away on the pavement opposite.

He would have made an excursion across the road to see if he could discover anything, but he dared not leave go the railings. By the time he had wondered three or four times what he ought to do the square was as still as death again.

He had an attack of the horrors then. He didn't like being

in a lonely place where shrieks had been heard. He had a gold watch on and a diamond pin, and he felt that if any midnight prowler came along the fog would offer him a fine chance to knock him down and get clear away with whatever he liked to help himself to.

Arguing in this way Mr. Simpkins was nerved with the courage of despair, and made a desperate effort to go on.

After floundering about for nearly three-quarters of an hour, he ultimately found himself in Oxford-street, although he had fancied he was close to the Hampstead-road.

He got as far as the Horseshoe in Tottenham Court-road in safety, and then, as his residence was at Haverstock Hill, he managed, by following his nose, keeping in a straight line, and appealing occasionally to much-enshrouded forms that sometimes were policemen and sometimes pillar-boxes, at last to reach Laburnum Villa.

He was so delighted to be safe at home that he turned into bed and forgot all about his adventure in the square, and dreamt the dream of the just.

And the next morning at breakfast he read in the *Standard* that a fearful murder had been committed in Blank-square; that a young woman's throat had been cut by some person unknown, and that the deed was probably committed between the hour of midnight and 1 a.m.

All the particulars known were given in a second edition, which came out at ten o'clock.

Mrs. Eva Littleton lodged at 9, Blank-square, having the drawing-room floor. She was the only lodger. The landlord of the house and his wife had been visiting a friend at Norwood, and had been unable to get home on account of the train service being suspended by the fog. When they

returned in the morning, and let themselves in with the latchkey, the first discovery they made was their lady lodger dead on the floor of her room. The motive might have been robbery or not. The rings the deceased usually wore were gone, and so were her watch and locket. All the reporter had been able to ascertain about Mrs. Littleton was that her husband had never been seen, that a dark gentleman sometimes came to tea, and that the landlady didn't know anything of her for or against, except that she paid her rent regularly, and lived respectably so far as she knew, and that sometimes she had letters from abroad.

At the inquest Mr. Simpkins volunteered his evidence, but no clue was found to the perpetrator of the deed, and the young solicitor had almost forgotten the strange incident in his career when his newly-purchased musical box brought it all vividly back to his memory again.

He sat down that evening in his easy-chair at home; and with the musical box on the table playing its twelve tunes to him, he thought out what he should do to try and get to the other end of the chain of evidence of which he now held the first link.

He was going to be an amateur detective. He had made up his mind so far as this, that he would try, alone and unaided, to fathom the mystery of the long-forgotten murder in Blank-square.

R. E. D. had told him that the ticket of the musical box had been found among her husband's papers after his death. Who was he, and how came he to be pawning the property which was stolen from Mrs. Littleton on the night of the crime? That was the first thing to ascertain.

The following day he went over to R. E. D.'s residence.

She had paid her bill that morning and gone away.

“Had she left any address?”

“No, she hadn’t.”

That was the gist of the conversation between Mr. Simpkins and the servant on the doorstep, and the young solicitor failed in all his subsequent efforts to find out R. E. D.

He was sure it was the identical musical box of the murdered woman, because he remembered on the trial it had come out that some of her jewellery was missing too, and here was the jewellery and the musical box, all pawned presumably by the same person.

He fancied he ought to communicate with the police, but he wanted, if he could, to have the merit of discovering the mystery himself.

If the culprit was R. E. D.’s husband, he was dead, and couldn’t be hanged, of course ; but still it would be some satisfaction to trace the crime home to him.

He determined to keep the matter to himself for a while, and see what he could find out.

* * * * *

One evening Mr. Simpkins sat at his open window enjoying the air. His musical box was on the table by him, and being wound up it was playing its tunes.

Mr. Simpkins was gazing at nothing in particular and everything in general, when suddenly his attention was attracted by a man on the opposite side of the road.

This man had stopped suddenly, and was listening intently to the music.

As the tunes succeeded each other he seemed to be a prey to some violent emotion ; then, catching the earnest look of Mr. Simpkins, he pulled his hat over his eyes and strolled away.

The idea flashed across Mr. Simpkins's mind in an instant that this was the missing murderer.

The more he thought of it the more he felt convinced that chance and the musical box had put him on the scent.

He rushed into the hall, put on his hat and hurried off after the stranger, but he had disappeared. He went up one street and down another, but the man was not to be seen.

The next night he sat at the window again, and singularly enough there was the same mysterious stranger on the opposite side of the road.

Mr. Simpkins wasn't quite sure what he should do. He thought a little diplomacy was advisable. He couldn't walk straight out and give a man into custody for listening to a musical box.

"I must scrape acquaintance with this man somehow," he said, "and try the effect of a sudden surprise on his conscience. I've heard that's what detectives do."

No sooner was the idea conceived than it was executed, and Mr. Simpkins was smoking a cigar and strolling up and down in front of his house. Singularly enough the other man strolled up and down too, and didn't seem inclined to go.

"Ah," thought Mr. Simpkins, "he wants to make an excuse, and speak to me. I'll give it him. He's playing into my hands."

The stranger was now close to the amateur detective.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the stranger, "but could you tell me what the rent of that house next door is?"

The house next door was to let, and empty, and the notice only gave the name of the agent to apply to.

"I believe it's £60 a year," said Mr. Simpkins.

“And could you tell me about the size of the rooms?”

Mr. Simpkins was delighted. The man was playing completely into his hands.

“Very fair,” he answered; “but they are the same size as mine, and if it is any convenience you can step into mine and see.”

The stranger seemed delighted at the proposition.

“You are very good,” he said, “and if it’s no trouble I should like to. I’m looking for a house, and I want to decide at once.”

Mr. Simpkins led the way into his house, and showed the stranger over it. Then he prepared for his grand *coup*.

He took him into his sitting-room, where the musical box was.

The stranger’s eyes were on it in a moment, and Mr. Simpkins noticed the look.

In an innocent way, he remarked, “Ah, you are looking at my musical box.”

“Yes,” said the stranger; “it seems a very good one.”

“Yes, it has a curious history—it belonged to a lady who was murdered.”

The stranger started.

“Murdered! Good heavens, you don’t say that! Why, when I —” Then he suddenly paused and seemed confused.

This was Simpkins’s opportunity; he ran to a drawer and pulled out the jewellery he had redeemed.

“And these,” he cried, holding them up to the man “also belonged to the murdered woman.”

* * * * *

“Oh, indeed,” said the stranger; “well, then, I’m bound to inform you that you are my prisoner.”

"What do you mean?" cried Mr. Simpkins, starting back with astonishment.

"I shall arrest you on your own confession of murdering Eva Littleton, and being in possession of the property stolen from her house on the night of the crime!"

Mr. Simpkins didn't know if he was on his head or his heels.

"Do you know I'm a solicitor, sir?" he said.

"Yes, I do," answered the man, "and I've suspected you ever since you gave evidence at the trial. It wasn't a bad dodge in case anyone should turn up who had seen you in the square that night."

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"That I'm going to give you into custody! Why, you've got the murdered woman's property! I always thought you had."

Mr. Simpkins was dumb with amazement. He was so confounded and astonished that when the stranger put his head out of the window and shouted "Police!" he simply sat down and waited, while a big crowd came outside and a policeman came up stairs, and when he found himself in a cab going to the station on a charge of murder, all he could say was, "Well, I'm blest!"

* * * * *

At the station the stranger made the charge, and then Mr. Simpkins learned that he was an amateur detective, who was always trying to find out mysterious murders. He had lived in Blank-square, and knew the tunes the box used to play, and he had always said some day he should hear that box again, and he had; and when he found out that the house it came from was the house of Mr. Simpkins, who at the trial had confessed he was in the square on the night of

the murder, he had put two and two together and been "diplomatic."

Then Mr. Simpkins explained to the inspector that he had bought the tickets of a lady, and that he had been doing a little amateur detective business too; and his story seemed so probable that at last the charge became a general conversation, and the amateur detective confessed perhaps he had been in too great a hurry in arresting Mr. Simpkins, and Mr. Simpkins confessed he had been in too great a hurry to suspect the amateur detective.

"But why did you go so white when I showed you the jewellery?" asked Mr. Simpkins.

"Because I thought I was alone with a murderer and a madman," answered the amateur detective.

The inspector saw there was no case, so he detained the property and let Mr. Simpkins go home.

The police set inquiries on foot for R. E. D., but they never found any trace of her, and they came to the conclusion that her husband, wherever he was, had committed the murder and pawned the things, and she had really found the letters when he died, and sold them, little thinking that they were the connecting link of a mysterious murder.

And since that day Mr. Simpkins has never purchased pawn-tickets advertised in the newspaper. A friendship has sprung up between him and "the stranger." They have both retired from the amateur detective business, but they often talk of the Blank-square murder, and the strange adventure it led them into, all through a musical box that played "Annie Laurie," "Home, sweet Home," "The Last Rose of Summer," and "I'm leaving thee in sorrow, Annie."

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The murder here described will not be recognised. The circumstances have been altered, as the adventure in connection with the pawned property happened to a gentleman well known in society. The mystery of the murder has never been revealed, nor the motive discovered, but the pawned property is still in the possession of the authorities. The gentleman has no desire to claim it. Amateur detectives are so fashionable now, he might be arrested again.

PLEDGE XVII.

A PAIR OF EARRINGS.

A CROWD of roughs with a fringe of the respectable classes ; gangs of ragged boys and dirty women, with unkempt hair and battered bonnets ; here an Irish group discussing with animated gestures the misfortunes of an absent member ; there a pale-faced woman with a baby clasped in her arms, her eyes red and swollen with weeping ; over all, a hubbub of jeers and oaths and gutter slang.

The same crowd, differing only slightly in its elements, gathers almost daily at a certain hour outside Bow-street Police-station, for it is the time when “Black Maria,” the prison van, stands waiting at the door, and the signal is given that the prisoners are coming out.

A lad of about eighteen comes first—a full-blown specimen of the London rough ; he steps up jauntily, and his comrades in the crowd give him a cheer. He turns his wicked face round with a daring grin upon it, and waves his hand as the constables hustle him in, and shut him in one of the compartments.

An old woman, her grey hair matted and dishevelled, her features grimed with dirt, and her rags caked with the filth of the streets, comes next, and her feeble limbs hesitating at the high steps, she is hoisted up with scant courtesy by the officials.

“There’s Biddy Maloney ! Good-bye, Biddy !” shouts the Irish group, and Biddy launches out a wild Irish impreca-

tion as her farewell benison to her neighbours from the court hard by.

The next "passenger" is a jaunty gentleman, in a light suit of the latest cut, and a tall hat set jauntily on one side ; he twirls his moustache as he gets into the van, and seems quite amused at his situation. As he passes in, he shouts out something which seems like a foreign language to the respectable fringe. It is 'thieves' patter, but someone in the crowd understands it well enough and answers him. The man is a swell mobsman caught picking pockets, and the gentleman in the crowd has probably been told whom the stolen watch and pocket-book have been passed to.

There is a slight silence as the next "character" is brought down the steps of the court-house. "Poor fellow!" says a lady who has been stopped by the crowd on her way to Covent Garden Market ; " how respectable he looks."

It is not a pleasant sight to see, this handsome young fellow of thirty, dressed like a gentleman, white faced, trembling, and abashed, as, with head bent low, he passes to the prison van.

As he stands upon the step, a woman's cry of grief rings out loud and clear. He turns sharply at the sound, his white face flashes for a moment on the crowd, and he is gone.

There are only four prisoners ; the door is banged to, the policemen leap into their places, the van drives off, and the crowd parts and dissolves.

But one young girl still stands clutching the railings by the court, and looking after the van with a look of unutterable despair. It was she who uttered the cry. It is her young husband ; the father of her little child, the man she trusted with her whole heart and soul, that she had just seen

thrust into the prison van, with ragged outcasts and hardened sinners.

Yesterday she believed him to be the best of men ; yesterday she held her baby up to him to kiss with all a mother's pride ; yesterday she thought that fortune was at their feet, and that nothing could break up that happy little home.

To-day she knows that he has broken the laws of God and man ; to-day she knows that they have lived in a fool's paradise ; that the plenty with which she has been surrounded has been won by fraud ; that he whom she believed so noble and so good is a detected thief—a man who has betrayed the confidence reposed in him, and systematically robbed the firm who gave him a position of the highest trust.

To-day she has listened, with ashen cheeks and a bursting heart, to the story of his systematic guilt, and her short dream of happiness is departed for ever. To-day she has learnt that she, too, has been cruelly deceived, and that while with loving care she husbanded the resources at home, he was squandering his ill-gotten wealth with dissolute men and women.

She does not realise the worst all at once. All is forgotten for the moment but the shame of seeing her husband a prisoner. It is only when she kneels by the cradle of her little one in the desolate home whose master will come to it no more, that she realises the depth of her shame and humiliation.

* * * * *

Winifred Marks knew the worst the day that her husband was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude. She knew then how he had deceived her from the first ; how he had married her when he was over head and ears in debt ; how

he had plunged further into crime to make a home and keep her in what he called “style”; and how, after a time, he had gone back to the old fast life he had led in the days before she crossed his path and inspired him with a pure passion.

Ned Marks, with his handsome face and soft winning tongue, had made an easy capture of Winifred’s heart in the old days when she walked to and fro between her mother’s house and the florist’s in Oxford-street where she was a shopwoman. He met her going home first, and rendered her a slight service in freeing her from the attention of an elderly Oxford-street pest. Then he came to the shop for buttonholes, and so—but why re-tell an old story? Knowing that marriage was the end of the first volume of their romance, is there one of my readers, male and female, who cannot fill in the incidents for themselves?

Ned had got into a fast set. He had gambled and lost a lot of money; he had, even in the days of his courtship, begun a system of fraud in order to supply his constantly impoverished exchequer. He held a fair position in a City counting-house, and his salary was £250 a year, but he lived up to treble the amount, and he was a gambler by instinct.

Winifred came across his path like an angel of grace. He fell honestly in love with her, and determined, in his impetuous way, to marry her and live happy ever afterwards.

Her mother died, and she was friendless and without counsel. She turned all the more readily to the shelter he offered her, and was as proud of her young, handsome husband as ever woman was of man.

It was all *couleur de rose* for two years. Then Ned began to come home later and later, and to look ill and

worried. He told her it was some important business of the firm that kept him late and worried him, and she never doubted it. She had all she wanted—a pretty home, no stint of money, and presently God gave her a little baby to keep her company when Ned was away.

It was when the baby was six months old that suddenly the crash came and her idol was shattered. It was then that his wild wicked deeds were blazoned to the world, and she learned the lie he had lived so long.

She loved him then more than ever. In his agony and shame she pitied him, and would have gladly borne his punishment for him. But the law hid him from her sight, left her husbandless and her child an orphan, and the law and her husband's creditors swept down upon his effects and left her homeless and penniless—a felon's wife with a baby at her breast.

The law provided *him* with food and shelter and medical care because he was guilty ; the law cast *her* forth an outcast with her child, to beg or borrow, or steal or die, because she was innocent.

The law takes no heed of the innocent wife and the helpless children when it seizes on the bread-winner. It knows nothing of ruined homes or broken hearts. To the guilty the law is merciful, to the innocent it is merciless.

Society will take care that the felon's punishment is humane and tempered with mercy God help the felon's wife and babes, for they are no concern of Society's.

Winifred Marks, a fortnight after her husband's sentence had been pronounced, was alone in the world with the clothes she had been allowed to keep and the baby nobody offered to keep for her. To live she must eat, to eat she must earn money. The only way to earn money was to take

a situation, and how could she do that with a baby in arms? She had ten years of helpless widowhood to look forward to, and so, like the brave woman that she was, she looked the situation boldly in the face and determined, with God's help, to brave the storm and battle on till the law should give back the prodigal to her loving arms.

In the long lonely nights after the first bitter blow she would lie with her baby at her breast and picture the ten years as past. She was twenty-four now, she would be thirty-four then, and Ned would be ten years older, and, oh, so changed!

She prayed to God to let her live, to help her to battle bravely through those weary years, for the child's sake—and for Ned's.

* * * * *

“BOARDING-HOUSE FOR CHILDREN.”

It was written in ugly black letters on a bit of board nailed above the door of a lonely house on the London road some twenty miles from town.

It was a grim, forbidding house to look at. A small neglected garden surrounded it. Never a green leaf relieved the sad, sombre sameness of the grey brick walls. No human face peeped above the dirty muslin blinds that shrouded the windows. No sound of life came forth from it. It might have been a prison or the home of the dead. The notice on the board said that it was a boarding-house for children.

They must be very good children to make so little noise, the passer-by would think, as he gazed at the gloomy house, and reading the legend listened for the sound of children's voices.

But if he went on into the village, and asked curiously

about the children's home he had passed on the way, the mystery was solved.

The place was a baby farm, kept by a stern, sour-faced woman, who ruled her charges with a rod of iron. There was short shrift there for the baby that made a noise, said gossip, and spiteful tongues whispered that there were many good reasons why the children were never seen.

One bright afternoon in May a young woman with a baby in her arms stood looking anxiously at the lonely house.

Apparently satisfied that it was the place she was in search of, she knocked timidly.

The sour-faced woman came to the door.

“Does Mrs. Grunton live here?” asked the young woman, betraying her nervousness in the trembling tone of her voice.

“I'm Mrs. Grunton,” was the answer; and then, with a diabolical grin that was meant for a smile, the woman added, glancing significantly at the baby, “Do you want to see me on business?”

“Yes, if you please.”

Mrs. Grunton invited her visitor to step into the parlour, and begged her to state what she could do for her.

The young woman summoned up her courage, and told her story. She wished to leave her baby with Mrs. Grunton, to whom she had been recommended by a friend.

Mrs. Grunton would accept the charge on her usual terms.

The terms were arranged, and the mother rose to leave. Kissing her baby, with the tears running down her cheeks, she placed it in Mrs. Grunton's arms, and begged her to be kind to it, and take care of it. She should come and see it as often as she could, and send the money regularly.

"All right, my dear," said Mrs. Grunton, "of course you will. By-the-by, you haven't given me your name and address in case of accident."

The mother blushed scarlet.

"Is it necessary?"

"Well, it's as well. Of course you mean to pay regular, and all that sort of thing; but accidents happen, and I might want to write to you. It's usual to have the address."

The young woman hesitated a moment, then drew an envelope from her pocket, and gave it to Mrs. Grunton.

"That address will find me for the present."

Mrs. Grunton glanced at it. The name was a little indistinct. Would her visitor say what it was?

"Winifred Marks."

"Thanks. And the baby's name is——"

"Edward."

They had reached the front door talking. Mrs. Grunton had the baby in her arms. As she stood on the doorstep, Winifred Marks turned and clasped the woman's hand.

"Oh, Mrs. Grunton," she said, "you will take care of my baby, won't you? I'm very poor, but I'll pay you well. I wouldn't part with him if I could help it, but I am forced to."

"There, there," answered Mrs. Grunton as cheerily as she could, "your baby's as safe with me as if you had it yourself. The air here will do it good. You won't know it when you come again."

Then the door closed, and the baby was shut from the yearning gaze of the young mother. And, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, Winifred Marks went back to London to take a situation and earn her daily bread.

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For a twelvemonth Winifred Marks kept her situation, toiling early and late for a paltry wage, just enough to keep her and to pay for the child. When from her scanty earnings she could save enough for the fare, she would go and see it, but once or twice she returned terrified and alarmed—the child looked so ill.

But directly afterwards Mrs. Grunton would write and say that it was better, and she would be relieved.

But she fell ill herself, and for a fortnight was out of work, and so had only just the money to send, and keeping out of work she fell in arrears with the child's money.

One day she received a letter to say that unless the arrears were paid at once the child would be sent to the workhouse. "And if they won't take it," wrote the woman, "I sha'n't feed it on credit."

The threat was inhuman. It went to the mother's heart at once. The idea of her little one starving was so terrible that it nearly drove the woman mad.

She arose from her sick bed and dressed herself. She would go off there and then and fetch the child away. Then she remembered that the woman would not give it up without the money.

Winifred had to dress respectably to keep her situation, but when she looked about her for something on which she could borrow money her clothes were the only things she saw.

Then she remembered that in her little treasure-box she had still her husband's first present—the pair of gold earrings he had given her in the old happy sweetheating days.

Because they were the first present, she had saved them from the wreck, and treasured them as something sacred.

But now her baby was in danger, and to shield it she would have given her life itself.

So she tenderly unwrapped the last link of the past from the white paper, and went over the road to where the golden balls swung in the sunshine.

The earrings were bought in the days when Ned Marks scattered his gold with a light hand, and they were valuable ones.

Winifred borrowed enough on them to pay her fare and have a balance for Mrs. Grunton's bill. If she could settle, she thought, she would be all right for another fortnight, and by that time she would have got to work again.

Weak and ill as she was, she took the train and went down at once. When she came to the "Boarding-House for Children," and saw her little one, her heart stood still with terror.

She snatched it from the woman's arms, and clasped it to her breast, as a tiger snatches its whelp from the foe.

Death was in her baby's face. Its limbs were shrunken and wasted, its little cheeks were hollow, and its large eyes, gleaming with a strange light, stared from its head in a weird, wild way that told its own story.

Fierce words and high woke the silence of Mrs. Grunton's abode that afternoon. Winifred accused her of neglecting her baby—of starving it. Then she burst out crying and became hysterical, and then she threatened and was spiteful again.

Mrs. Grunton was used to scenes probably, for no muscle of her hard features relaxed. Only, when the mother rose to take her child away, Mrs. Grunton stood with her back to the door and held out her hand for the money.

What could a weak, friendless woman and an agonised

mother do but pay to the last farthing? Anything to get her child safe in her own loving arms, and see to it herself.

Out on the London road, with the thin baby staring at her with its wild eyes, Winifred Marks for the first time realised her position. What was she to do with the child?

She had her return ticket, and went home with it, and braved the wrath of a hard-hearted landlady, whose rent was overdue.

Up in the little room, half-starved herself, she nursed it and petted it, and tried her best to bring it back to health; but the mother's love came too late. The "Boarding-House for Children" had done its work, and in a few days the staring eyes of the felon's child shut suddenly and its little thin limbs were rigid.

Then, childless and alone, penniless and half-starved, the felon's wife lifted her tearless eyes to God and prayed to be at peace where her baby was.

And in the hour of her supreme agony, tortured in body and mind, lacking food and lacking warmth, with a dead baby on her knee, and her future dark and dismal and devoid of hope, could she have peered through the dividing space, she would have seen the child's father, her guilty husband, and envied him his happy lot.

He had a slight cold, and was in the prison infirmary warmly tucked up, and the atmosphere was kept at a suitable temperature. By his side was a little jelly to tempt his dainty appetite, and near him sat the kind doctor, who was most solicitous about his health. All was order and cleanliness and comfort; and as the convict lay back and dozed off peacefully he felt there were worse lots in the world than that of a felon.

Ay, indeed! The lot of a felon's wife and child, for instance.

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The earrings, unredeemed, hang to-day in the pawn-broker's shop, and there they may hang for some time. Perhaps they may hang there till Ned Marks's time is up, and he may see them and buy them again—perchance for some other lady-love. He may never recognise in them his first present to the girl who lost her baby and broke her heart because her punishment for being a felon's wife was greater than she could bear, and who died long before his ten years were over.

PLEDGE XVIII.

A FAMILY BIBLE.

THEY were a strange couple, the Rev. John Hogard and his wife, and the gossips of Dorden talked about them rarely.

Dorden dissents. Dorden is strong in chapels, and Dorden's besetting dissipation is prayer meetings. The Dordenites meet so often in strong bodies for lectures, magic-lanterns, and schoolroom entertainments, that news circulates rapidly. Add to this the fact that female Dorden is given to gathering in little knots at its neighbours' garden-gates, and that male Dorden goes to its local club and institute with great regularity, and you will easily understand how, in this pretty little village some thirty miles from town, everybody's business is known to everybody else.

The Rev. John Hogard was known to everyone before he had been a resident ten days. When it was rumoured through the village that Myrtle Cottage had been taken by a clergyman, and a clergyman of the Church of England, there was quite a little flutter in the dovecotes of Dorden. They soon found out he was married, and were quite prepared to see a clerical gentleman of the ordinary Established Church type, and to find his wife a haughty dame on the wrong side of forty, who dressed severely, wore her own hair, and looked down upon Dissenters.

The Rev. John and his wife arrived, and Dorden not only

opened its eyes with astonishment, but its mouth too. Metaphorically speaking, it opened its mouth very widely indeed, and concerning the new arrivals it took Dorden a very long time to shut it.

Certainly, if ever a couple gave legitimate cause for village gossip, it was the rev gentleman and his better half.

He was a nice-looking old gentleman, of about sixty-three, very tall and stern, and quiet, but with something very strange in his eyes.

“A perfect gentleman,” said everybody; “but there is something curious about him we can’t quite make out. He looks as if he wasn’t all there.”

Not being all there was a Dorden equivalent for being a little queer in the head. That was the worst thing gossip found to say about the gentleman.

But about the lady. “*Lady!*” said Mrs. Sparkes, the butcher’s wife; “a pretty lady!” and Mrs. Sparkes tossed her ringlets in a manner that spoke volumes.

Mrs. Hogard, it must be confessed, did not look like a lady. She was a young woman of about three-and-twenty, her hair was died of a dirty yellow colour, her big, bold eyes seemed to leer by instinct, her cheeks were of roseate hue that Nature never imparted, and she dressed in a style which caused Dorden to blush to the roots of its hair.

They were indeed a strange couple, this grey-headed, courteous, white-tied gentleman, and this fluffy, yellow-haired young woman, who walked and talked and dressed as no respectable woman ever did in this world.

At least, so said Dorden, and the more the new arrivals were discussed, after chapel, at tea-meetings, and over garden-gates, the more widespread grew the belief that there was something very wrong about Mrs. Hogard.

Myrtle Cottage was one of a row of houses—small country villas of the modern type; five rooms, a front garden and a portico intended to be pretty. The rent was about £28 a year, and so Dorden came to the conclusion that the rev. gentleman was not going to live in grand style.

Dorden was quite right. After a few weeks it was a well-established fact that the internal arrangements of Myrtle Cottage were as peculiar as its mistress.

Strange tales flew round of very little meat from the butcher's and a great deal of brandy from the grocer's; of strange sounds of oaths and threats spoken in a woman's voice; and gradually people began to speak of the Rev. John Hogard with pity, for it was known that he was an old man married to a young woman who was not only low in her habits and vulgar in her dress, but who was, worse than all, a confirmed drunkard.

Dorden puzzled its brains and speculated long as to how this ill-assorted couple came together. We who are privileged to peer back into the past may solve the mystery at once.

The Rev. John Hogard was as kind-hearted and honest a gentleman as ever wore the Church's uniform. Well connected, and possessed of a good living, he passed twenty happy years, knowing no trouble and feeling none of life's bitterness, till the wife of his young manhood and middle age was taken suddenly from him.

She fell forward dead in his arms one summer's day in the parsonage garden.

The shock was great, and told upon his gentle nature. The place where she had died grew hateful to him. He saw her everywhere. His friends came about him and noticed his altered appearance, his restlessness, and the strange

look in his eyes, and advised travel and change of scene.

They made him resign his curacy and go to another part of England, to a famous health resort where the invalids and the hypochondriacs flock together at certain seasons of the year.

His friends were wealthy, and kept him well supplied with funds. His elder brother, a high dignitary of the Church, told him not to trouble himself with work, but to seek health, and so, leading an idle and purposeless life, the widower stayed on at the fashionable watering place, killing time and brooding over his loss.

There is no doubt that this loss had seriously affected him. It had not made him mad in any strict sense of the word, but it had weakened his brain; it had left him in a weak, unsettled condition, in which an evil-designed person might easily take advantage of him.

In an unfortunate hour such a person crossed his path, and, to make it all the worse, that person was a woman. Chance flung him into acquaintanceship with a red-cheeked, yellow-haired young woman, who said she was a governess in a nobleman's family, and that she had been sent out of town to recover from an illness which she had contracted in her employer's service.

Maud Harrington set her cap at the Rev. John Hogard from the first—why, who can say? The true history of her life, if told, might explain her motive. She had been no governess at all. Her early career it might not be well to inquire too closely into. She was a bad, designing woman, and was perhaps tired of the hand-to-mouth, rich to-day and poor to-morrow, life she had been leading. She evidently thought that this clergyman, whom she imagined

to be wealthy and who was known to be highly connected, could give her a permanent home, position, and the means of gratifying her insatiable vanity.

She tried the game on, and succeeded beyond her expectations. In a month she stood at the altar with her dupe, and he swore to love and cherish a heartless and abandoned adventuress.

The news of the rev. gentleman's second marriage reached his friends speedily. They were astonished at first—disgusted when they had made inquiries, and found out what manner of woman it was who could claim kinship with them.

The wealthy relatives and the high dignitary of the Church wrapped themselves in the mantles of their respectability, and bade the erring one pass by on the other side.

The Rev. John and his yellow-haired wife found all doors closed against them. In the expressive language of Society, they were "cut dead."

Foiled in her desire to obtain social recognition and to lead a fashionable life, Mrs. Hogard took to an old amusement of hers with renewed ardour. She had learned early in her career a means of deadening shame and drowning care; and, now that there was nothing to relieve the monotony of her life but the, to her, senseless chatter of a dotard, she sought relief from the old source.

It was only by degrees that the utter worthlessness of the woman who had caught him in her toils dawned upon the poor clergyman, and the discovery made still further havoc upon his rapidly-decaying powers.

He came to Dorden to hide and be quiet, to recruit his health if possible, and, in a place where he was unknown, to endure the burden of his shame. But, alas! each day it grew heavier. The demon drink had got so fast a hold of

the woman now that she was beyond all reclaim, and to the shame of being linked for life to a worthless woman came the terror of being alone with a furious drunkard.

His health began to fail visibly under the double blow, and Dorden, knowing of the drunken wife, saw the grey-headed old clergyman shuffle along, bent and broken, as he went for his morning walk, and pitied him.

They pitied him more than ever when, later on, they learned that his worst trouble had yet to come.

This is no romance deftly spun in a novelist's brain. This is but one of those life-histories whose truth is stranger than aught fiction can furnish.

Lately in this village of Dorden I stood opposite Myrtle Cottage as the early May sunshine smiled upon the little front garden, and heard its history from one who at the last was the truest friend poor Parson Hogard ever had.

It was she who told me how one day, being then his next-door neighbour, there came a low, half-frightened tap at the door, and when they opened it, there, standing in the cold—it was a raw winter day—was the poor old clergyman, his lips blue, and his features pinched and pallid.

At the proffered invitation he timidly slipped into the room, and then half childishly began to whimper and mumble out that he was very sorry to ask it, but could they lend him a little coal to make a fire. His wife had gone to London, and he had no coals.

And while he spoke he cast such longing looks at the dinner-table that he was invited to sit down and eat.

He ate like a wolf!

He ate like a starved wretch that feels the fiercest pangs of hunger.

His secret was revealed, though he had kept it so well.

He had been driven out of his house as the animal is driven from its lair—by the pangs of hunger.

His wife had taken all the money in the place and gone up to London, and left him alone without warmth and without food.

She came back that night mad drunk, and the parson was seen no more outside for a time.

On the same day of the following month the feeble tap came at the door again.

This time there was no excuse made.

Broken down in body and mind alike, the old gentleman had lost the art of concealing his trouble. To the good soul who had been his friend he sobbed forth his misery, and to her he came for the food which was to keep life in him.

Once a month the small allowance which his relations still allowed him was forwarded through the solicitors. And regularly as it came his wife seized it and went off and spent it in drink, coming home only when the uttermost farthing was spent.

Drink! drink! drink! That was all she thought of now. The home had gone to wreck and ruin; the furniture bit by bit was being sold; his books, his clothes, all were going, that she might gratify her fierce, unholy thirst.

Hunger she did not feel—about his hunger she never cared. Warmth brandy gave her—that he needed warmth in the chill winter days she never thought—or, if she did think about it, she did not care.

The neighbours began to know how bad things were with the poor old parson. Now and then Dorden, to its credit, did sundry good deeds by stealth.

The old man found it worth his while to go out when he was cold and hungry. Doors were opened to him, and he was bidden sit by the fire and chat, and strange to say it often happened when he came in that there was a cold meat pie, which Mrs. Jones would like him to taste, or Mrs. Brown had got some stew just going to be served up for dinner. Would he stay and try a little?

He was very grateful, and would mumble his thanks; and sometimes, too, he would cry, for the poor troubled mind was getting weaker than ever.

That he was poor and in trouble grew so well known at last that somehow the high dignitary of the Church heard of it, and he sent him now and then a hamper with hares and pheasants, and sometimes a joint would find its way into the hamper.

Unfortunately this generosity was thrown away, for the hampers were opened by the yellow-haired lady, who bore the hares and the game in triumph to the nearest market town and there sold them. And every hamper day Dorden knew that at nightfall the clergyman's lady would reel into the village drunk on the proceeds of the day's sale.

When the second winter came round the Rev. John had grown so feeble that he hobbled along to his neighbours slowly, and leant on a big stick.

He came one day to the house next door to him with a scared white face, which looked all the whiter for the deep red mark round his eye. He was trembling like a child, and looked frightened, as though he feared someone was following him.

"She did that," he whimpered, presently; "she hit me. I asked her for some bread because I was hungry, and she hit me."

He cowered down as he spoke, and rubbed his hands together childishly, looking into the fire.

They comforted him as best they could, and tried to coax more of his story from him, but his mind was wandering.

Suddenly he burst out with a long, incoherent story of his old days. He was happy and rich and respected again. He told them of his first wife, and then of his rich relations, and how they'd all loved him once and been good friends to him.

"But now," he muttered, becoming lachrymose again, "I haven't a friend in the world."

He stayed till nightfall, and then tottered back to his home. Three days went by, and no one saw him.

Then the neighbour who had first been kind to him plucked up courage and went to Myrtle Cottage and knocked at the door.

The yellow-haired one answered her. Her face fiery red with drink, her eyes fierce and wild, she put her arms akimbo and requested to know her visitor's business.

"I want to see Mr. Hogard," was the reply.

"He won't see anybody. He doesn't like people to come prying into his business. They'd better mind their own."

Then the door was banged-to in her face.

The days went by, and still the old clergyman remained within doors. The neighbours had their eyes open, however, and they talked more than usual at the tea-meetings and at the garden-gate.

One told how the things had been sent away from the house lately and sold. Another had heard that even the old gentleman's clothes had found their way to the village pawnshop.

Then the gossips put their heads together and compared notes, and by so doing it was calculated that, beyond the clergyman and his wife, Myrtle Cottage at the present time could contain very little.

Mrs. Hogard had been watched lately, and her journeys had been to two places, the pawnshop and the public-house. She generally called at the former first.

It was one day when the old clergyman had not been seen out of doors for three weeks that Mrs. Hogard went staggering through the village with a huge book under her arm.

It was patent to everyone what it was, and a thrill of horror went through the dissenting bosom of righteous Dorden at the sight.

Under her arm the clergyman's wife carried a family Bible, and everyone guessed its destination.

Things must have come to a pretty pass at Myrtle Cottage if the family Bible of a clergyman was going to the pawnshop.

An hour afterwards Mrs. Hogard, walking unsteadily, and with a bottle poking its neck from under her mantle, came down towards her home.

The whole of the village could see how drunk she was, and the women came to the doors and watched her.

Suddenly they saw her stumble and go down all of a heap.

There were a crash and a shriek then; the people, running, found her lying on her face, while from her trickled a little stream of mingled brandy and blood.

She had stumbled over a stone, fallen forward, and the bottle in her arms shivering, a great jagged piece of glass had cut her throat.

They picked her up and carried her into the nearest house. Clasped in her hand was the ticket of the Rev. John Hogard's family Bible, and that, too, was smeared and splashed with the strangely mingled fluid.

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While his wife lay wounded in the village, some of the neighbours went off to Myrtle Cottage to break the news to her unhappy husband.

They knocked and received no answer. They knocked louder and yet louder, and shouted; and still no answer came.

Then they burst the door, and went fearfully in, one behind the other, dreading what they might see.

Through the lower rooms they searched, and found them almost bare; the floors were dirty, and the few pieces of furniture left gave evidence of neglect and violent treatment.

Up in the room above they found what they were in search of.

The Rev. John Hogard lay on an untidy bed, an old blanket thrown over him.

He did not move when the neighbours entered his room, only his eyes turned towards the door with a strange, vacant look.

“Where's my wife?” he mumbled. “Why doesn't she bring me some food? I'm hungry.”

The neighbours came about him and gathered a strange story from his disjointed utterances. The old clergyman was quite childish now, but he knew that the pangs of hunger were strong upon him. Little by little it came out that he had hardly tasted food for days—that even his clothes had been taken from him by his wife and pawned for drink.

"I'm so ill and so hungry," he groaned. "Why doesn't my wife come?"

Dorden was moved to its heart when it heard that the poor old clergyman had been found in a state of absolute starvation. All that Dorden could do it did, but the help came too late. The Rev. John Hogard was past human help.

He grew weaker and weaker, and still mumbled and asked for the wife who did not come.

Just before the end, far-off scenes came back again to the darkened mind, and he was in the garden of the parsonage with the first wife he had loved so well.

All Dorden went to his funeral, and the high dignitary of the Church sent his carriage to join in the procession.

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Mrs. John Hogard recovered in the infirmary from her wound, and was out again soon after her husband had been buried, but her red face and yellow hair were seen no more in Dorden.

A few months back a woman, who said she was a clergyman's widow, was indicted at the Middlesex Sessions for robbing an old man with whom she had been drinking, and was sent to prison.

Her story that she was a clergyman's widow was not investigated. Had it been it would have been found to be quite true. The wretched outcast in the dock was once the yellow-haired and drunken wife of the Rev. John Hogard. There was still the scar across her throat where the broken bottle cut her the day she pawned her husband's family Bible and got drunk with the money.

PLEDGE XIX.

VARIOUS.

MRS. MORIARTY was the best of wives, and a splendid manageress. Mr. Moriarty thought so at least, and openly said so. Mr. Moriarty's employment was a precarious and mysterious one, yet for ten years he had lived in Little Georgiana-street, keeping a house, voting at elections, and fetching the supper-beer from the public-house at the corner with praiseworthy regularity.

Little Georgiana-street was not aristocratic, and had no high-flown notions. It was chiefly remarkable for the crowds of dirty children upon its doorsteps, and the free-and-easy conversations which the neighbours held with each other from the upper windows of their houses.

It was a street where the blinds were more often twisted round than pulled up, where wounded panes were healed with brown paper plaisters, and where the outward and visible signs of resident female industry were plentifully placarded in parlour windows.

“Mangling done here,” “Ladies’ own materials made up,” “Work done with a sewing machine,” and “Charing in all its branches,” were among the many legends of the street which he who ran might read.

There was another peculiarity about Georgiana-street, and that was the way its knockers were used.

The oldest inhabitant had never heard a rat-tat-tat given at a Georgiana-street front door. Ladies and gentlemen

knocking about the neighbourhood knew better than to cause such confusion to a household.

A rat-tat-tat in Georgiana-street would have brought every occupied floor to the door, as nobody could have known for whom it was intended.

In Georgiana-street you ring the bell for the basement, knock once for the ground floor, twice for the first, and three times for the top. No fancy flourishes, no variations on the knocker will do there. The knocks must be clear distinct thumps, with a pause between each, so that the listeners can count them and know whose business it is to answer the door.

From this you will naturally infer that Georgiana-street let lodgings, and you will be quite right. The householders generally contented themselves with two rooms and a kitchen, and "let off" the rest. Mr. Moriarty was no exception to the rule, and by letting lodgings he paid his rent.

How he got his living, as I have previously stated, was a mystery. Mrs. Moriarty didn't know, and he himself wasn't always quite sure about it. But by some means or another he managed to rub on, sometimes having a good week and sometimes a bad one, and relying always on Mrs. Moriarty's splendid management to pull him through.

The Moriartys were magnificent specimens of the come-day, go-day, God-send Sunday class. The week drifted by, and there was a wild struggle to tide over Saturday night with a view of floating peacefully into the haven of Sunday with a hot dinner, clean linen, the master's black suit, and the missus's best gown and bonnet, and enough loose cash over for an occasional outing.

Saturday night *was* a struggle, and then it was that the management of Mrs. Moriarty asserted itself.

The best clothes were generally pawned about Tuesday, the tablecloth, the parlour clock, and various other articles, useful and ornamental, saw the Moriartys over Wednesday; odds and ends, kitchen utensils, &c., insured Thursday's necessities, and Friday made shift the best way it could.

But Saturday was a dreadful day. On Saturday the shopping had to be done, on Saturday the finery had to be redeemed, and old scores cleared off, on Saturday Sunday's dinner had to be got in, and not only the dinner, but the means of cooking it.

The sacrifices of the week had to be redeemed on Saturday night, and although on Monday they could begin to float back again, and become money once more, there was the intervening Sunday during which they must represent invested capital.

It was in solving the problem of having your goods and the money they represented—in having, as it were, your cake and eating it too—that the wife of Mr. Moriarty's honest bosom earned his loudly-proclaimed certificate that she was “the wonderfulest woman at managin' as ever was.”

Mrs. Moriarty was proud of her honourable distinction and the fame it won her. Young housewives in the neighbourhood sought her advice eagerly “What to pawn, where to pawn, and how to pawn,” was the subject of a lecture which Mrs. Moriarty delivered gratis on many a Saturday night at the house of call in Georgiana-street, where the ladies of the neighbourhood exchanged confidences over the marketing glass.

But one eventful day the great Past-Mistress of the Art of Domestic Management, the famous authoress of “How

to Live on Nothing a Week," found even her resources heavily taxed.

There came a crisis over which nothing but absolute genius could triumph.

Did Mrs. Moriarty rise to the height of the occasion, or did she yield at last to the army of difficulties which the Fates arrayed against her?

Maria Moriarty, the best manageress in Georgiana-street, here let the history of your famous struggle with circumstances be narrated. This Sunday morning, when, having given John Moriarty his second cup of tea, you furtively snatch the *Dispatch* from him and turn to the "Three Brass Balls," I have no doubt you will blush to find it fame.

The blow came late one Thursday night, the night when matters were at their lowest ebb. Mr. Moriarty came home about eight, and there was a letter for him on the kitchen table.

He opened it, read it, said "Phew! Well, I'm blest! Here's a go!" and made use of various other ejaculations, expressive but by no means explanatory.

When he had recovered himself from the effect of what was evidently very startling intelligence, he called up stairs to Maria.

Maria was at the front door taking the air and gratifying the sight-seeing instincts of the female breast by watching the undertakers' men trying to get a very wide coffin into the very narrow doorway of the opposite house.

Maria did not at first respond like a dutiful wife to the voice of him she had promised at the altar to obey, for the coffin had stuck and the situation had grown deeply interesting. Furthermore, the wife of the gentleman for whom the coffin was intended had appeared at an upper window, and

was giving a sympathetic doorstep audience a full, true, and particular account of the last hours of her "poor dear," and had just got to the period when "he went off like a lamb, fancying he was a-playin' skittles and a-shoutin' out as he'd got a pint on the game and Joe Smith wasn't playin' fair." So Mrs. Moriarty lingered, and allowed Mr. Moriarty to shout out "Mariar!" three times before she turned from the door and went down stairs.

Then she found Mr. Moriarty in a state of intense excitement, which she called upon him to explain.

The explanation was simple. Mr. Moriarty's uncle and aunt in the country, of whom he had expectations, were coming on an unexpected visit to town, and would arrive on Friday. They had invited themselves to stay with Mr. Moriarty, and trusted he would arrange to lodge them and take them to see everything in London on Saturday, as on Saturday night they returned to their native village.

When Mrs. Moriarty had heard her husband's explanation she sat down in a chair the picture of blank despair.

This uncle and aunt she knew were people to be made a fuss with. This uncle and aunt were reported to have saved at least £200. This uncle and aunt had given them hospitality several times when they had scraped up the money for a couple of days in the country. This uncle and aunt had always been led to believe that in London Mr. and Mrs. Moriarty were very great people indeed, and now this uncle and aunt were coming to see for themselves, and, of all days of the week, on a Friday.

"We must manage it somehow, Mariar," said Mr. Moriarty in a hollow voice.

"It's all very well to say *somehow*," answered Maria, bridling up; "*what* how is what I want to know."

"You're a wonder, my dear, at managing," artfully suggested the master of the house; "I'm sure if you was to set your wits to work you'd manage it."

"Look here, Mr. Moriarty, this is Thursday; they're coming to-morrow. How much have you got?"

Mr. Moriarty put his hands into his pockets and fumbled. The result was two half-crowns, a florin, a shilling, a screw of tobacco, three halfpence, and a clay pipe.

Mrs. Moriarty surveyed the result of this voyage of discovery with scorn.

"Now, look here," she said; "this is what I've got."

And then from her pocket she produced a little bundle of pawn-tickets.

"There's your Sunday clothes, there's the parlour clock, there's the big saucepan, the best tablecloth, the clean sheets, the blankets, the plated forks, and the best teapot."

And as the good lady mentioned each of the articles on which they had lived during the week, she laid the pawn-broker's receipt for it on the table.

Mr. Moriarty suggested with a sickly smile that this uncle would have to be visited before the visit of the other uncle could be decently arranged for.

"It's no joking matter," said Mrs. Moriarty indignantly. "All these things must be got out if they're coming to stay here, and we're to go out with 'em on Saturday. Now, if it had been Sunday, I could have managed as usual."

"Of course you could, my dear. We should have had the first floor's and the top floor's rent, and with your management—— I say, my dear; do you think the first floor 'ud pay his rent to-day instead of Saturday, to oblige us?"

"John Moriarty, you're a fool!"

It *was* foolish to imagine such a thing, and John confessed it. Still, something must be done.

Presently Mrs. Moriarty rose from her seat and paced the room. She was evidently in thought, and John refrained from disturbing her. Presently she put her foot down, and exclaimed triumphantly "I've got it!"

Mr. Moriarty looked down. He expected to see a black-beetle a flat corpse beneath the foot of his lady-love.

There was no romance in John Moriarty's nature. "Got what, my dear?" he inquired nervously, when, the foot being moved, no victim was to be seen.

"An idea," answered his spouse. "I believe I can manage it."

Mr. Moriarty rubbed his hands. "I knew you could, my dear—I knew you could," he exclaimed gleefully; "you're the wonderfulest woman at managing as ever was; I always said so, and now I know it."

It was not an easy task to redeem all those articles with eight shillings and three halfpence, and none but a domestic genius like Mrs. Moriarty could have conceived the plan or carried it to a successful issue.

* * * * *

Early the next morning Mrs. Moriarty set to work. The guests were to arrive at midday, and there was no time to lose. She went round to the tradespeople where her credit was good till Saturday, and purchased the meat and vegetables, tea and butter, &c., necessary for the feeding of the expected aunt and uncle.

Having secured a fine piece of boiling beef, the first difficulty was the large saucepan to boil it in; that had to be redeemed. The stock of ready-money was sufficient for that, and so the beef in the saucepan was speedily on the fire.

Mr. Moriarty remained at home to superintend, for the exigencies of the case demanded much running out on the part of his better half.

The next thing was to get the rooms tidy and have the parlour clock, which was such an ornament to the mantelpiece; uncle and aunt must see it when they arrived, and then the rest was easy.

Running up stairs to the bed-room—the room which was to be aunt and uncle's, for Mr. and Mrs. Moriarty would make shift in the parlour with the sofa—the clever house-wife slipped off the dirty sheets and the blankets, and went off to the pawnshop with them. What she got on them redeemed the clock. At the same time she took the parlour table-cover and pawned it for enough to redeem the white tablecloth. This was put on the table as if laid for an early dinner.

At midday aunt and uncle arrived, and were entertained in the parlour by Mr. Moriarty, while Mrs. M. busied herself in the kitchen, John having strict instructions to keep them out of the way.

Directly the beef was boiled it was put on a dish and covered over, while the saucepan was hurried off again to "uncle's." The big saucepan and one or two smaller utensils were pawned for enough to redeem the plated forks; and hot, but happy, Mrs. Moriarty returned, finished laying the table, and took her place at the head of it.

After dinner John took uncle and aunt up to the top of the street, and showed them the way to the park. They were to stroll about, and return in time for tea, when he and Maria would be dressed and ready to go out with them.

Directly they were out of sight, the best tablecloth was hurried off and pawned, and the table-cover redeemed with the proceeds.

Now the most difficult task of all had to be approached, and it worried the Moriartys very much. John's Sunday clothes had to be redeemed that he might accompany his revered relatives to the play.

Off went Mrs. Moriarty with all her own finery, and pawned it to redeem John's things. John should take the visitors out to-day, and then to-morrow he should have business and stay at home while Mrs. Moriarty took them out. Then she could pawn his things and redeem her own with the proceeds.

This arrangement being agreed to, all was well as far as it went. After tea John departed in his holiday apparel to escort his visitors to the theatre, leaving his wife at home to complete her management.

The bed had to be made up for the guests now, and the clean things put on it. The parlour clock had done its duty; it had been seen; it could easily stop, and be sent away to be cleaned and repaired. Under Mrs. Moriarty's arm it went to the famous depository whose sign is three golden balls, and was pawned for nearly enough to redeem the blankets and sheets. The balance was made up with the parlour fire-irons, which had hitherto escaped the conscription.

The bed was comfortably made up by the time aunt and uncle returned. John was loudly informed that the clock had suddenly gone wrong, and, it being so awkward not to know the time, had been sent up the street to be repaired, and the white tablecloth was not missed, as supper was brought in on a tray.

That night Mr. and Mrs. Moriarty slept the sleep of the just in a make-shift on the sofa, the table-cover and various ingenious contrivances doing duty for bed-clothes.

In the morning the table-cover went in early, and the tablecloth came out in time for breakfast. Mrs. Moriarty cautiously effected the change of clothes, pledging John's and redeeming her own, and then she chaperoned the country visitors through the cheap sights, leaving John at home with full instructions as to the various necessary manœuvres in ringing the changes with the pledges.

The visitors were to depart that evening, so John took the sheets and blankets over at once. The cold beef was to be for dinner, so the saucepan remained in; the white cloth remained on, the table-cover not being required till dinner was over, so that the sheets and blankets yielded the ready-money which John required to carry on with, it being necessary to lay in various little things.

The party returned to dinner, and after dinner they suggested that the house should be shut up, and that both John and Maria should go out shopping with them, and accompany them to the station.

No excuse would be accepted.

"Go and change thy clothes, lad," said uncle, "and come wi' us. 'Tain't often I trouble thee, and I'd like for us a' to have a walk."

The Moriartys exchanged signals of distress, and got out of the room together.

The capital required to complete the arrangement was barely sufficient, and here was John's suit to be got out.

What was to be done?

John counted up what he could spare, and it was far short of the necessary sum.

They rushed into the kitchen and up to the bed-room. There was nothing pawnable. All the available things were in the parlour, and how could they get them out unobserved.

It wasn't the slightest use trying for the rent yet. The second floor didn't come home till eight, and the top floor rarely "parted" before Monday morning.

Even Mrs. Moriarty was nonplussed.

If aunt and uncle had only been outside, she could have pawned the contents of the house without removing them. The pawnbrokers will take the key, and lend you so much. She could redeem them before the lodgers wanted to come in. But aunt and uncle were in the room, you see.

Suddenly the "wonderfullest of manageresses" had an idea. "Mr. Bloggs" (that was the pawnbroker) "knows us, and he's a decent sort," she said. "Go over, and change there, and leave what you've got in your pocket to make up the difference."

It was a brilliant idea. Mr. Moriarty rushed off and found Mr. Bloggs willing to oblige. He changed in the pawnbroker's back parlour, pawned his every-day clothes, with five shillings in the pocket; and Mr. Bloggs, out of consideration for an old customer, lent him enough on them to redeem his best.

Ten minutes afterwards aunt and uncle walked up Georgiana-street, with Mr. and Mrs. Moriarty both in their best clothes, and the neighbourhood stood on its front doorsteps and wondered where "they was off to" in their Sunday clothes.

* * * * *

At the station that evening there was an affectionate leave-taking, and uncle was so delighted with the hospitality

he had received that he chucked Mrs. Moriarty under the chin, and presented her with a five-pound note to buy herself a present in remembrance of his visit to town.

That Saturday night there was a great redemption going on, and the Moriartys talked over Mrs. M.'s excellent "management" with a pleasure heightened by the fact that uncle's fiver had restored to them all their opignerated household gods.

"Mariar, my dear," said Mr. Moriarty, at supper, "you've managed excellent. Why, I do believe, give you only a frying-pan and a teapot, you'd keep house for nothing as long as we'd just got enough to pay the interest."

The question of the interest and the halfpenny for each ticket is a mere trifle to the ladies and gentlemen of the Moriarty type. Lord Shaftesbury and his fellow philanthropists are great upon the question of "thrift." I wonder whether they know that among a certain class of the poor the Moriarty system of management largely prevails, and that a big portion of many a working man's scanty wage goes to fill the pawnbroker's till with interest and ticket-money, in consequence of the system of weekly pawning and redeeming which, down Georgiana and kindred streets, is considered part and parcel of skilful household management.

The struggling poor, by this system of weekly pawning, pay interest for loans on good security which would cause many a Cork-street money-lender's client to shudder. When our legislators have five minutes to spare, they might give a glance at our pawnbroking system as it affects the necessitous poor, and compare it with that of foreign countries. In Austria pawnbroking is a charitable institution, and the State lends to the poor man money on his

goods without interest. In England the private trader is authorised by law to charge 20 per cent., and something for the ticket. The ginshop and the pawnshop are the great twin brethren who stand like ogres in the paths of those who aim at the social reformation of the poor. And the Government of this country stands behind the ogres and backs them up.

PLEDGE XX.

A WAR MEDAL.

AT the prison gates in the early morning stands a poor old woman, crippled and bent with age. A battered bonnet, a shabby shawl, threadbare with long years of wear, and its once glaring colours faded to a uniform dirty drab, and a dress that bears the mark of long exposure to rain and sun,—these are the outward and visible signs of old Nanny Nettleship's rank and calling.

Eighty winters have set their snow upon her scanty hair, and Time's cruel fingers have pinched the thin face into wrinkles and puckers and seams, but still the aching limbs must travel and toil, for there are little mouths that would lack food did old Nanny Nettleship fold her hands in idleness and rest her weary bones.

One of those little mouths is puckered with a baby smile now at the prison gates as a little mite of six holding Nanny's hand looks up into her face and lisps :

“Look, granny ! even God's glad daddy's coming out to-day. See how He's making the sun shine.”

“Yes, dearie,” answers the old woman ; and then mutters to herself, “It's many a long day since a bit o' sunshine gladdened his heart, poor boy.”

“How long will daddy be, granny ?”

“Not long, my pet.”

“Granny, will God ever shut me up in a big black place like this ?”

"The Lord forbid, my pet! There's a pretty gee-gee ——"

The old woman wishes to interrupt her grandchild's prattle. Little Louie is given to that baby blasphemy which City Missions and Sunday-schools are mainly responsible for; and the old lady has an idea that it is wicked. Louie brings her the Sunday-school religion second-hand, and sometimes a little bit mixed; and old Nanny, who has had a rough time of it in this world, finds Sunday-school religion a hard nut to crack.

Louie's teacher has told her that God put her father in prison for being wicked, and one day the child came home terrified, and cried out that her poor daddy would have to go to an awful place and be burnt with fire if he didn't "'pent." Teacher had told her so.

Old Nanny dratted the teacher's "imperence," and soothed the little one by telling her it was all a pack of lies.

And the next day the missionary called and expostulated, and informed the old lady that, if she interfered with his religious instruction, the occasional grants of tea and sugar, blankets and coals, which the Mission found it worth while to bestow, would be cut off.

After that Nanny held her peace. She let the Mission consign her son to the flames hereafter for the sake of the present warmth of the blankets.

All the help that could be got was wanted for Dan Nettleship's family. Dan was doing his two years for a robbery with which he had been mixed up. Dan's wife, poor woman, lay on a bed of sickness, sinking slowly out of her misery, and Dan's three little children had to be reared and fed somehow.

When the sentence was pronounced, Nanny was in court. It broke her heart that her Dan should come to shame, for the Nettleships came of honest stock.

Dan's father had fought his country's battles, and left his arms and legs and eyes scattered about the globe, and in his old age a grateful country allowed him a trifle to keep all that was left of him from starving.

But when the remains of the old pensioner's body went to look for its scattered fragments, a portion of his pension was continued to his widow; and having in her seventieth year put her little income into Dan's pocket, she went to live with him. Dan was her youngest child, but the only one left to her. He was five-and-thirty, but she still called him her boy. He was married, and so old Nan came back from the pensioner's graveside to Dan's place, and set to work to make herself as little a burden as possible.

It was all well enough at first, till Dan got mixed up with bad company. He was deceived, fooled, and made a dupe of. Old Nan will go to her grave believing that. But appearances were against him. The cruel gentleman in the white wig made it look so black that the jury, who didn't know Dan as his mother did, said he was guilty, and the judge gave him two years as easy and pleasant like as if he'd been giving him a month's holiday to go to the seaside for the benefit of his health.

He was such a nice, good-tempered judge, and smiled so sweetly to show a set of white teeth, that Nan could hardly believe he was hurting her boy till it was all over. But when her son looked towards her with his ashen face, and cried, "Mother, take care of Louie and the little ones," her heart nearly stopped still, and she stood up in the back of the court and called across to him to be of good heart, for

while her old hands could work his dear ones should not starve.

Then he went down the well from the dock out of sight, and Nanny tottered home to be husband and father and mother to a sick and helpless woman and three little children.

To be all that, and the bread-winner too, long after the threescore years and ten of life had passed over her head !

She had roughed it years ago as a soldier's wife, and had accompanied her husband's regiment many a time. She had grown hardy in the old days, and now her early training stood her in good stead. Louie, Dan's wife, was too ill to work. She was feeble and ailing before the great trouble came. After the trial she was prostrate. She lay like a tired child whose heart is wrung with grief, and made no effort. She had clung to her husband, who had put his strong arms about her and kept her alive with love and gentle care.

Now that he was taken from her she drooped swiftly as the flower languishes where no sun comes.

Then it was that old Nanny Nettleship came and took her place at the head of the little family. She nursed and cheered the sickly wife, she loved and tended the children. She eked out her little pension among them, and went forth to earn their bread. She went early mornings to the markets, and bought and sold again. By sheer hard work she built up a little connection in outlying suburbs, where she could sell fruit and flowers and vegetables, and when her load grew heavier than she could bear in consequence of the increase of custom, she managed to get a meek little brown donkey who drew her barrow.

Winter and summer she was up in the early mornings to

buy at the market, and all winds and weathers she was in the streets through the long day to sell her goods and earn food and shelter for Dan's wife and children.

It was no easy task then to make both ends meet, for the wife wanted many things that cost money, and Nan never let the children go ragged or scantily clad.

So the two years drifted slowly by. The children grew apace, but the wife drooped and drooped in spite of all Nan's care, till at last the old woman feared her son would be a free man only to find his children motherless.

But as the time drew near for her husband's release, Mrs. Nettleship revived a little. The hope of seeing his beloved face seemed to give her strength to live on.

"I shall see him before I go, mother," she would say to the old lady, "and then I shall die happy."

The day of Dan Nettleship's release has come at last. Over in the little room in Southwark the sick wife lies, her thin hands clasped together, the fierce light of consumption in her eyes, listening with eager ears for the first sound of his footsteps.

The younger children are awed into quietness, for granny has told them that daddy is coming home to-day. They hardly know him. They were such mites when the trouble came, that they could understand nothing of it, and now they half dread the advent of this stranger who is their "daddy."

Outside the prison gate stand the old woman and little Louie, and presently he for whom they are waiting so eagerly comes through the door.

The sun is shining brightly, and people are passing by, but as the eyes of the man and the old woman meet everything fades from their sight.

"My boy, my boy!" she cries, and presently her old arms are about his neck, and tears of joy are coursing down her wrinkled cheeks.

Dan Nettleship kisses his old mother reverently yet half fearfully. It seems to him that the prison taint is on him, and that his lips pollute those of the honest old soldier's wife who bore him and whom he has disgraced. Then he looks half shyly at his little girl, as though he expected to see her shrink away from him.

But Louie slips her little hand in his and looks up to him with her lips pouted for a kiss. He picks her up in his arms, and gives her, not one, but a dozen.

He puts her down, and presently she pulls him by the coat as they walk along.

"Daddy!"

"Yes."

"Mammy's waiting for you at home. Mammy longs to see you so, and she's so glad you're coming home to-day."

"God bless my poor Loo!" said Dan. "How is she, mother?"

Nanny Nettleship told her son quietly all she had to tell. It was no use deceiving him. Loo was sick unto death.

"She's only lived to see you, Dan, my poor boy," she said.

Dan questioned his mother eagerly. Little by little he won from her the whole story of the two years. His face was very white as he learnt all, and thought of the torture his dear ones had gone through, and all his brave old mother had done when he was paying the penalty of his crime.

There and then, in justification, half to himself, half

to his mother, he went over the whole ground, showing that, though technically he was guilty, morally he was innocent.

"It was that barrister that prosecuted who settled me," he said. "He put it so straight, I should have found myself guilty if I'd been on the jury."

They had quickened their pace as they talked, and so they went along, the old woman holding her son's arm and little Louie his hand.

They had quickened their pace because Dan was terribly anxious to see his wife. In his prison, night after night, through the weary months, in fancy he had pictured this day, and now it had come.

He should clasp his poor darling to his breast once more, and in his strong arms she should breathe what remained to her of life quietly away. But she would not die. She had grieved over him. That was it. Once by his side again she would mend. He was very hopeful, was Dan, and when they passed a square with some weak, sooty trees in it, and heard a bird chanting a cockney carol to as much sun as could see above the chimney-pots, the man, excited with his new freedom, whistled the first bars of "Cheer, Boys, Cheer," and without thinking, left go of his mother and his child, and began to run as if he were in a hurry to get home.

It was an old habit of his, this breaking into a run when he was excited or thinking. But just as he began to run a crowd turned round the corner, in hot pursuit of someone, and the cry of "Stop thief!" rang from a score of lips.

A minute before a man had brushed past him, running too. Before he could think, the crowd was

rushing by. There was a policeman among them joining in the chase. He stopped for a moment and looked at Dan.

Whether it was the knowledge that he had just come out of prison, or a sudden revulsion of feeling at the sight of the uniform he had such cause to remember, Dan didn't know, but he began to tremble.

The policeman took hold of his arm. Nanny and little Louie had come to Dan's side, and both wondered what the policeman was doing. He showed them in a moment.

Twisting Dan's arm with a professional jerk, he thrust his hand into the side pocket of the pilot-coat he wore, and drew forth a purse.

The crowd had stopped too, and gathered round. Among them was a young lady, very hot and flushed and out of breath.

"Is that your purse, miss?" said the policeman, holding Dan firmly.

"Yes," said the young lady, "that's it; but he's not the man who took it."

"No, miss; but he'll do as well. It's been passed to him by his pal. That's what they does mostly always. You'd better come to the police-station now."

With that he seized Dan roughly, and forced him along.

White as a ghost, dumbfounded and trembling, Dan attempted to explain that he was innocent—that the purse must have been put in his pocket.

Moaning and wringing her hands, old Nanny Nettle-ship stood at the edge of the crowd with the trembling Louie clutching at her gown and asking what daddy had done now.

And at home, waiting with a yearning heart, and counting the minutes as they went by, lay Dan Nettleship's dying wife.

He thought of her and of the agony she would endure when the time went by and he did not come, and the thought maddened him. He would not be taken away now almost at the threshold of his home—now, when after two weary years he was about to see his poor darling once more.

He tore himself from the policeman's grasp with a desperate effort. Then the man seized him by the throat, and they fought. Dan was a powerful fellow, and he was mad. He rained blows upon his assailant till the man's face was disfigured and bloody.

Still he held on.

Then the crowd closed in and fought too. Help came, and Dan was overpowered. Foaming at the mouth, and mad with rage and despair, he was dragged along by brute force, the knuckles of the stalwart constable being forced into his throat and making him black in the face.

And home to the dying woman went the old mother and the little child to tell their pitiful tale, and dash the cup of joy from her lips just as it touched them.

* * * * *

Dan Nettleship was taken before a magistrate, and committed for trial at the Middlesex Sessions for being concerned in the theft of a lady's purse, and for assaulting the constable.

His old mother came to see him in his cell, and brought him news of his wife. The shock had nearly killed her, but the old woman had saved her. She had talked to her, and convinced her that at his trial Dan would be found innocent—

that it was only a few weeks longer to wait, and then all would be well.

She had told the wife nothing of how, excited and desperate, Dan had fought the constable, for on that point the old lady herself had grave misgivings. Little Louie had obeyed her grandmother, and held her tongue, but she herself was quite convinced that the teacher's prophecy was coming true, and that daddy was now on his way to the awful place.

The old lady saw her son in prison, and comforted him with brave, hopeful words. She promised him she would move heaven and earth to clear him and set him free, and he had the same solemn faith in her that all had who came to know old Nanny.

The famous barrister who had secured his former conviction was to her mind a tower of strength. If she could get him to defend her boy she felt he was saved.

She would get him, cost what it might.

She saw the solicitor, and told him she wanted the famous counsel to defend her son. He told her it would cost too much.

“ How much ? ” asked Nanny.

The solicitor told her.

It was a great deal of money for a poor old woman to raise, but Nan went away and raised it. She brought the gold and gave it to the solicitor, who promised to retain the great man.

Nanny raised that money by parting with all she treasured now in the world, by parting with her donkey and drawing her heavy barrow herself; and when that was not sufficient she pawned the medals which her husband had won at the cost of his limbs, and which his dying hand

had pressed into hers, bidding her treasure them and his memory together as long as she lived.*

The day of the trial came, and Nanny took her place in court and waited, confident in the result now the famous barrister had Dan's case in hand.

Dan, in due course, came up, pale and ill, and took his place in the dock, and the counsel for the prosecution opened the case.

Nanny glanced eagerly at the counsel's box ; the great man was not there.

Dan had noticed it too.

"I beg your pardon, your lordship," he said, "but Mr. —— is going to defend me, and he is not here."

Up started a blushing youth in a wig.

"Beg pa'don, my lud ; I defend prisoner. Mr. —— is engaged elsewhere, my lud."

The great counsel had handed over his brief to a junior. It is quite the usual thing. A poor prisoner retains a clever man at an enormous sacrifice. The clever man pockets the fee his name secures, and hands the poor wretch over to a 'prentice hand as a matter of course.

Old Nanny would have got up there and then and made a speech, but Dan looked at her and motioned her to be quiet.

It was his luck. Everything was against him.

The prosecution told its tale, and piled up the chain of facts. The young counsel blushed, made small jokes, and damaged his client unintentionally at about every second question he asked.

Here was a man who had just come out of prison—a gaol

* A pawnbroker receives war medals at the risk of his licence, but nevertheless they are frequently pledged.

bird, the prosecution called him—found running away with a purse in his pocket, and when arrested he fights the policeman. Such facts going to a jury, what can the verdict be?

Dan writes a little note, and it is given to his counsel.

The counsel reads it before he calls witnesses for the defence.

“Call Mrs. Nettleship,” he says, putting the note down and old Nanny gets into the box.

The young counsel asks her one or two questions, and then says, “Tell us what happened,” and leaves her to it. It was the best thing he could have done.

The old woman, with her white hair and weeping eyes, pours forth her tale with the eloquence of truth and despair. She tells all the story of the long struggle while Dan was in prison, and of how, just as he came out, and was nearing home to see his dying wife, he was made the victim of a mistake, and how, in his despair at being dragged away when his wife’s life depended on his presence, he struggled and fought to get free.

Old Nanny tells her story with such pathetic force that she is not interrupted. She interests the judge and the jury too, and looks of pity are cast to the dock, where Dan has broken down at the mention of his wife’s name, and stands, the tears trickling down his cheeks.

The judge sums up dead in Dan’s favour. He suggests that the man first pursued put the purse in Dan’s open pocket instead of flinging it away, as less likely to be noticed. The jury clutch at the straw, and find him innocent of the theft. Of the assault they find him guilty, but strongly recommend him to mercy.

“Prisoner,” says the judge, “we have heard the story of

your misfortunes from your mother, and we believe it. We are bound to protect the police in the execution of their duty, but in this instance it is possible you were an innocent man made desperate by your peculiar position. You are discharged on your own recognisances to come up when called upon."

And finally, when Dan Nettleship went out of the court with his brave old mother leaning on his arm, one adventurous wight clapped his hands and cried "Bravo!" whereupon the usher sternly shouted "Silence!"

Home as fast as their feet could carry them went mother and son, and that evening the dying woman lifted her eyes to her long absent husband's face, and whispered that she could die happy now.

That night she slept her last sleep in his arms. The morning sun found her lying with her head pillow'd upon his breast, her lips parted in a sweet smile, her arm about his neck, and her heart still for ever.

* * * * *

Old Nanny Nettleship sits in her easy chair now and does no work, for Dan has taken his old place. There were those who heard his story at the court-house who held out a helping hand to him, and to-day he is an honest tradesman, and prospers.

And in his little home the old lady takes the place of honour. It was she who brought him home to receive his wife's last kiss; it was she who saved him at the trial when the counsel she had sacrificed so much to procure left him to his fate.

The war medals are in granny's keeping once more, and they will pass to Dan and to his children when the old soldier's widow lays down the burden of her years. They

are hallowed now not only with the valour of him who won them, but with the tender love and brave endurance of her who pawned them once to pay a counsel who took her fee and left her to do his work.

Perhaps, after all, he would not have done it nearly so well.

* * * * *

Three brass balls in half relief on the big outside door-plate of the pawnbroker's shop.

Three brass balls ! Weird and woful are the stories they could tell of the ruined and broken-hearted, of the wanton and the reckless, the wicked and the cruel, that creep past them into the gloom beyond. It is the voice they lack which here has spoken ; they are the stories hidden away in their brazen breasts which here have been told.

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